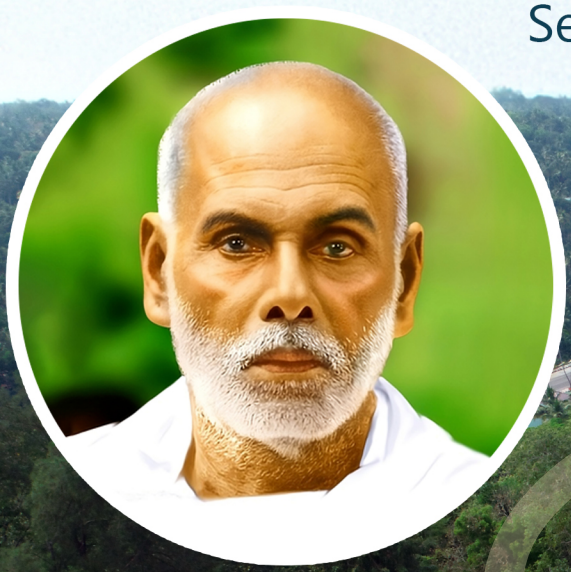
Language and Literature of Sreenarayanaguru

COURSE CODE: B21PH01DE

Undergraduate Programme in Philosophy

Discipline Specific Elective Course

Self Learning Material



SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

The State University for Education, Training and Research in Blended Format, Kerala

SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

Vision

To increase access of potential learners of all categories to higher education, research and training, and ensure equity through delivery of high quality processes and outcomes fostering inclusive educational empowerment for social advancement.

Mission

To be benchmarked as a model for conservation and dissemination of knowledge and skill on blended and virtual mode in education, training and research for normal, continuing, and adult learners.

Pathway

Access and Quality define Equity.

SGOU

Language and Literature of Sreenarayanaguru

Course Code: B21PH01DE

Semester - IV

Discipline Specific Elective Course
Undergraduate Programme in Philosophy
Self Learning Material
(Model Question Paper Sets)

SGOU

SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

The State University for Education, Training and Research in Blended Format, Kerala

SREENARAYANAGURU
OPEN UNIVERSITY

LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE OF SREENARAYANAGURU

Course Code: B21PH01DE
Semester- IV
Discipline Specific Elective Course
Undergraduate Programme in Philosophy

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MESSAGE FROM VICE CHANCELLOR

Dear learner,

I extend my heartfelt greetings and profound enthusiasm as I warmly welcome you to Sreenarayanaguru Open University. Established in September 2020 as a state-led endeavour to promote higher education through open and distance learning modes, our institution was shaped by the guiding principle that access and quality are the cornerstones of equity. We have firmly resolved to uphold the highest standards of education, setting the benchmark and charting the course.

The programmes offered by the Sreenarayanaguru Open University aim to strike a quality balance, ensuring students are equipped for both personal growth and professional excellence. The University embraces the widely acclaimed "blended format," a practical framework that harmoniously integrates Self-Learning Materials, Classroom Counseling, and Virtual modes, fostering a dynamic and enriching experience for both learners and instructors.

The University is committed to providing high-quality, inclusive, and value-based education. The Discipline Elective Course Language and Literature of Sreenarayanaguru, offered under the BA Philosophy Programme, is a meaningful step in this direction. This course introduces learners to the literary richness and linguistic depth of Guru's writings. The Self-Learning Material is based on authentic and scholarly sources that reflect the cultural, spiritual, and philosophical significance of the Guru's literature. The content has been reviewed by expert, scholars, and faculty members to ensure clarity, and academic value. The Self-Learning Material has been meticulously crafted, incorporating relevant examples to facilitate better comprehension.

Rest assured, the university's student support services will be at your disposal throughout your academic journey, readily available to address any concerns or grievances you may encounter. We encourage you to reach out to us freely regarding any matter about your academic programme. It is our sincere wish that you achieve the utmost success.

Warm regards.
Dr. Jagathy Raj V.P.

01-06-2025

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SGOU

Introducing Guru as a Poet

SGOU

BLOCK - 1

UNIT

An Introduction to Narayana Guru's Poetry

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- recognise Guru's dual identity as poet–philosopher
- explain how caste oppression shaped his early poetic voice
- identify recurring themes such as Advaita, Compassion and Ahimsa
- relate poetic metaphors to Guru's broader reform agenda

Prerequisites

Sree Narayana Guru (1856–1928) is widely acknowledged as one of the foremost spiritual and literary figures responsible for the architecture of modern Kerala. He was born in a small village named Chempazhanthi near Thiruvananthapuram, as the youngest child of Madan Asan – Kutti Amma couple of Vayalvaram House, a family belonging to the Ezhava community, which was historically marginalised under the rigid caste system of those times. Though he is distinguished as a reformist and worshiped as spiritual fighter in due castes, Guru's role as a great poetic genius has not been explored in the deserving level. One of its prime reasons in the contemporary times was that the centres belonged to the upper caste hindus did not recognised his scholarship, as he belonged to a subaltern section who were denied schooling in the then social structure.

Historically, Guru's poetry served as a vital tool for disseminating his philosophical vision and social ethics, offering a medium through which complex ideas could be

conveyed in a language that the common people could understand. At the same time he managed to address the caste Hindus in their language (Sanskrit) which functioned on a powerful medium to condition their for a mental wake up to redress governance of the marginalised. Guru's philosophical foundation lies in Advaita Vedanta, a non-dualistic school of Indian philosophy which holds that the individual self (Atman) and the supreme reality (Brahman) are one and the same, for their reflected in the neo-platonic view: all multiplicity is the fall from one. In other words, Atman and Brahman are made of the same stuff. He used poetry not for aesthetic pursuits alone, but as a means of imparting spiritual instruction and social transformation. In his view, the poet, philosopher, and social reformer do not play distinctive roles in the society as they signify different essentials of the same mission: to elevate human consciousness to promote social justice, unity, co-operation and peace.

Key themes

Advaita, Ahimsa, Equality, Compassion, Caste Metaphor, Renaissance

Discussion

1.1.1 Guru as Poet and Philosopher

Guru believed that true knowledge cannot be restricted in the realm of the abstract. It has to be communicated in a way that is clear, concise, and emotionally resonant. Hence poetry has become his chosen medium of expression which marks clarity of thought, philosophical insight, and social ethos. His versification does not seek to explore the possibilities of ornamental language as his focus is to enlighten, inspire, and instruct the target audience. Sree Narayana Guru's poetry, though initially not widely acclaimed within the Malayalam literary canons, has increasingly been appreciated and recognised for its profound depth and transformative vision. His works challenge conventional poetic standards, offering a unique blend of spiritual insight and the rest for social reform. Over the years, scholars and readers have come to appreciate the richness of his poetic contributions, acknowledging their enduring relevance and impacts on society. Unfortunately this approach reflects failure in understanding and practising Guru's vision and mission. Sree Narayana Guru's journey through the path of Advaita Vedanta is marked by profound inner peace and simplicity. He embodies serenity and conveys deep spiritual insights without resorting to elaborate expressions or display of scholarship. His approach is characterised by clarity and humility, reflecting the essence of non-dualistic realisation. His profound silence resemble an oceanic stillness, from which the depth of his poems emerge.

Like the pearls breaked which in the ocean's depths, these compositions reflect the yogi's profound inner experiences. They are comprised of hymns (Stothra kritikal), prayers (Prardhanas), mystical poems beaing yogic insight (Dasrsanikakritikal), exhortative poems (Prabhadamatmaka kritikal), translations (Tharjamakal), felicitastive peoms (Mangalasanasakal), manumentary verses (Samadhi slokas) and puzzle complementing stanzas (Samasya puranam). These works coming around 70 in number constitute the entire corpus of his writing. The literary outpourings of Narayana Guru signify the plurality of his distinctive personas as a devotee, yogi, and philosopher. One can discern a progressive ascent from one to the the next in these dimensions: the devotee gradually transforms into a yogi, who in turn evolves into a philosopher. When asked to elaborate on a verse from one of his early compositions, Guru remarked, 'The person who wrote that no longer exists,' substantiating the view of highlighting his continuous spiritual evolution.

Guru's approach to poetry is deeply ethical. He views the act of writing as a moral responsibility, a means of guiding others toward truth and self-realisation. In doing so, he follows the tradition of the ancient sages (rishis), who focused the nature of reality and preserved their insights in poetic form, in the Vedas and Upaniṣads. Guru's works align with this tradition, combining insight and expression, vision and articulation creating a world of perfect combination between matter and manner. He does not merely reiterate old doctrines; instead, he reinterpreted them in the light of contemporary social realities. For Narayana Guru, versification is not an artifice removed from life. Instead, it is a medium of art expressed through the sweet fusion of rhythm, metaphor, and thought. With this poetic vision, he revolutionised his creative writing to function it as a critique of existing injustices and open up new path way leading to individual and collective liberation.

1.1.2 Historical Context of Guru's Poetry

The significance of Sree Narayana Guru's poetry can only be fully appreciated within its historical context. Kerala in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was marked by deep social divisions, particularly along caste lines. The Brahmanical order dominated religious and social institutions, while large sections of the population, including the Ezhavas and the other lower-caste communities, were systematically excluded from temples (worship), education, and public life. In this environment, the emergence of Narayana Guru as a spiritual leader and poet represented a turning point.

Guru offered a vision of spiritual democracy that rejected caste-based discrimination and affirmed the fundamental unity of all human beings. His famous declaration, 'One Caste, One Religion, One God for Man', (One in kind, one in faith, one in God is man" - Jathi Nirnayam) was both a spiritual axiom and a revolutionary social statement. His poetry reinforced this vision and helped spread it far and wide. The 1888 Aruvippuram idole consecration (of Lord Shiva) was a critical moment in Guru's life and in the history of social reform in Kerala. By installing a Shiva idol by himself, Guru challenged the exclusive right of Brahmins to perform religious rituals. This act of defiance was echoed in his later poems, which criticised ritualism, caste prejudice, and blind faith.

Guru's poetry also responded to and interacted with other reform movements of the time. His contemporaries included Ayyankali, who led agitations for Dalit

rights, and Kumaran Asan, a disciple of Guru whose own poetry was influenced by Buddhist ethics and the ideals of social reform, hand in hand in to Guru's vision. Together, these figures contributed to what has been called the Kerala Renaissance, a period of intense cultural and intellectual ferment. Guru's literary output reached a peak around 1914, a year in which he composed some of his most celebrated works, including "Daiva Dasakam", 'Jātinirṇayam', 'Nirvrti Panchakam' and 'Ahimsa'. These poems addressed themes of social equality, compassion, and universal brotherhood, articulating a vision envisaging a society grounded in ethical and spiritual values. The period, also witnessed the global events such as the outbreak of World War I which brought newer significance and urgency to the theme of peace and non-violence.

Although Guru did not directly refer to these events, his poem 'Ahimsa' can be upheld as a timely response to the culture of violence and division that characterised both Kerala and the wider world. Guru's exposure to Buddhist and Jain traditions, as well as his appreciation for the ethical teachings of Christianity and Islam, influenced his works. His poetry synthesised the essence of these influences into a coherent moral and spiritual framework that transcended sectarian boundaries. This merit was the key to his appeal which invited its impact in the society.

Guru was not isolated from modern developments. He was aware of the transformations taking place in the fields of technology, education, and politics. His use of modern imagery, such as steamships, railways, and roads, reflects this awareness and the attempts in his poems to contextualise spiritual teachings within the realities of modern life. Thus, Guru's poetry, was both a product of time and a force that helped to shape its course. It gave voice to the aspirations of the oppressed, challenged the structures of inequality, and pointed toward a future grounded in justice, compassion, and spiritual realisation. He possessed a remarkable ability to write poetry effortlessly in Tamil, Malayalam, and Sanskrit. Some of his disciples have recorded what Gurudevan recalled in his later years that, during his youth, poetic talent was something entirely innate and unique to him. He is reported to have said, "In those days, writing poetry was never a struggle for us [me]. No matter how many people were present, we were [I was] able to compose and deliver a unique poem for each of them at the same time". This does not imply that Guru composed poetry only in his youth. It is significant to record here that his enthusiasm for poetry remained alive until the very end of his life. For instance, it was at the age of sixty that he composed 'Municharya Panchakam' and 'Janani Navaretna Manjari' at the age of 53, 1908.

1.1.3 Key Themes in Guru's Poetry

Sree Narayana Guru's poetry deals with a range of deeply philosophical, ethical, and social themes. His works are not confined to deep devotional fervour or abstract metaphysics. They reflect a grounded concern for human suffering an ardour aim to guide readers toward self-awareness and moral responsibilities. The opinion of Kumāra Mahākavi (Kumaran Asan), disciple of Gurudevan, regarding the poetic genius (kavanasiddhi) of Gurudevan is indeed worthy of remembrance. "It is our rare fortune that Swāmi was one among those exceptional mahāpuruṣas who not only possessed extraordinary brilliance but also a unique and unmatched poetic grace (Saraswatīvilāsam). When the supreme

tattvopadeśa of Swāmi merges with the natural beauty and sweetness of his poetry (Kavitāmādhuryaṁ), the resulting intellectual and aesthetic delight is beyond the need for explanation." There is perhaps no greater blessing for readers and the Śree Nārāyaṇa devotees than the fact that Gurudevan's universal tattvadarśanam was expressed through aesthetically refined poetic expressions (kāvyatallajaṅṅaḷ). It is now widely accepted that Sree Narayana Gurudevan was a wondrous kavīśvara, who, through the power of words, could perform a kind of verbal magic akin to illusion (Indrajālavidhya). Literary connoisseurs refer to him as "the greatest mahākavi Malayalam has ever seen."

In terms of structure, stylistic arrangement, and creative vision, Guru's poetry evokes memories of the Upaniṣads, the very essence of the Vedas, the Śruti. Unlike earlier ācāryas who produced commentaries (bhāṣyas) on the Upaniṣads, Gurudevan composed what can be regarded as Upaniṣads themselves, offering them directly to the world as blessings. Spanning Sanskrit, Malayalam, and Tamil, his works form a towering tree of wisdom (vijñānattinṭe malarcaippaṁ), a true spiritual offering to the world.

The works by Guru are potent enough to dispel even the doubts of future generations. Rooted in Parabrahma-satyaṁ, and radiating that very essence, Gurudevan's compositions make his divine persona tangibly manifest. His work rise far above the ordinary poetic landscape known to us, both in depth and breadth. Their thematic world, which bears testimony to the cosmic order (nikhilaprapañcaṁ) and the ultimate truth (paramasatyaṁ) that underlies it, can be truly grasped only by those with intuitive insight and deep contemplative minds, like the ancient ṛṣis.

One can see that Gurudevan has primarily reconciled the two great philosophical streams, Vedānta and Siddhānta, through his works, while also integrating other philosophical traditions. Unlike the polemical approach of previous teachers, Gurudevan emphasised synthesis (samanvayaparatā), not refutation (khaṇḍanaparatā), as these works clearly testify. Gurudevakṛtikhaḷ can be categorised as stotra (hymns), dārśanikaṁ (philosophical works), anuśāsanam (ethical or prescriptive texts), vivartanam (translations), mantram, sūtram, and prose compositions (gadyakṛtikhaḷ). Through the composition of homa mantras, Gurudevan attained the stature of a ṛṣi.

With the creation of Vedāntasūtram, he emerged as a sūtrakāra, and through the Śrīnārāyaṇa Smṛti and Śrīnārāyaṇa Dharma, works that serve as appendices to Gurudevakṛtikhaḷ, he established himself as a smṛtikāraka. This represents a rare occurrence in the history of spiritual literature. As Prof. Sukumar Azhikode sums up 'Three distinct phases can be recognised in Guru's quest for Truth. The early phase is that of the 'avadhuta' when he transcended all wordly attachments and was wandering in the woods. He was moving unconventionally facing the Divinity. All the early hymns have been composed during this period. The middle phase is that of the calm ascetic who spent his life in penance and meditation. The last phase is that of self-realisation. The deep mystical poems and exhortative poems have been composed during these advanced stages. Hence the periodic nature of the visionary can be seen systematically reflected in his respective creative poetic output.

1.1.3.1 Poetic Language as a Medium of Philosophy

One of the most distinct features of Sree Narayana Guru's poetry is his deliberate

use of poetic language as a powerful medium to express philosophical thought. Unlike many poets whose primary concern is literary beauty or personal emotion, Guru's creative energy is directed towards communicating universal truths, ethical values, and spiritual insight. For him, poetry is not just an art form but a tool of philosophical revelation, a means to illuminate the path of self-realisation and societal transformation.

Guru did not set out to write poetry for the sake of literature or to gain literary fame. His focus was never on poetic flourishes or stylistic complexity. Instead, he approached language as a medium of philosophical instruction, "a chariot of truth" designed to carry profound ideas into the hearts of ordinary people. This conscious restraint from excessive embellishment marks Guru's unique place in the history of Malayalam literature. In fact, Guru's own words and ideas reflect a conscious detachment from literary ornamentation. His philosophy was simple, truth does not require decoration. The beauty of poetry lies not in ornate language but in its capacity to reveal the essence of life and existence. In this light, poetic diction becomes a vehicle for exploring questions of self, the divine, human equality, and the nature of the cosmos.

1.1.4 Guru as Philosopher and Seer: Vedantic and Literary Legacy in the Vaidika Maṭha (Vedic monastery)

Guru's teachings and reflections were later versified into Sanskrited (entitled) Śrīnārāyaṇasmṛti by Ātmānandasvāmi in 1925 with an elabouration of his life added to the volume. The Homa mantram composed by Guru in Sanskrit inspired by Swami Shradhananda of Arya Samaj is noted for its spontaneity of creation. It is their discourse on Vedic fire rituals which culminated in this work (1925-26). Guru's compositions can only be remembered with immense wonder and reverence. He is a sūtrakāra (aphoristic writer), having written the Vedāntasūtram. He is a ṛṣi (seer), having composed the Homa Mantram. He is a smṛtikāra (writer of moral codes), having compiled the Śrīnārāyaṇasmṛti. These three compositions make Sree Narayana Guru an immortal figure in Indian Vedic literature. The Brahmavidyāpañcakam, composed by Guru, was preserved by the sage Ramana Maharshi. It was Narayana Guru who translated the Tirukkural and Uḻivila Oṭukkam from Tamil into Malayalam. After seeing the deity at the Nainār temple in Ārumānūr, he composed 50 Tamil verses known as Nainārpatikaḷ (Tēvārapatikaḷ). These were devotional hymns. Guru's Svānubhavagīti was composed at Tirunāveli and was later retrieved and documented by Karuvā Kṛṣṇanāśān in 1894.

When Gurudevan translated the Īśāvāsyopaniṣad into Malayalam, it was recorded by Svāmi Sugunānandagiri and Maravūr Bhāskaran Nāyar (1922). (This was mentioned in the 1912 edition of Śivagiri Māṣika, 'Aviṭunnu Karuṇāmūrttiyāṇu). Gurudevan's work Vedāntasūtram was preserved in the notebook of Śivalingasvāmi.

Of the hundred verses originally written, forty were lost due to his carelessness. Sundaram Piḷḷa, praised by Swami Vivekananda as bhuvanaikapanditan (the greatest scholar of the world), once visited Aruvippuram, recognised Guru's scholarly stature, and bowed at his feet, this is recorded in the Aruvippuram Centennial Memorial.

Guru later praised Svānubhavagīti in Dravidasaḍassu (Tamil intellectual forums), calling it the 'Tiruvācakam of Malayalam.' Kṛṣṇanāśān, who heard it directly from Guru's mouth, documented it with poetic consistency (antādiprāsa nibandha). He regarded the Svānubhavagīti as a divine gift (varadānam) from Guru. Below are the central themes that emerge across his major works.

1.1.4.1 Advaita (Non-Dualism)

Guru's philosophy is founded on the idea of Advaita, the concept that all existence is one and indivisible. In 'Atmopadeśa Śatakam', he addresses the illusion of separation between the individual self and the universal truth. This worldview dissolves boundaries created by caste, religion, and social status, and encourages the reader to transcend ego and realise unity.

1.1.4.2 Ahimsa and Compassion

Ahimsa (non-violence) is not merely abstaining from physical violence but a way of being that involves compassion, self-restraint, and love for all beings. Guru's Nirvrti Panchakam and Ahimsa are clear affirmations of this ethical ideal. He connects the notion of non-violence to dietary habits, caste oppression, and even interpersonal conduct: By linking violence to everyday choices, Guru extends ahimsa to the realm of social justice.

1.1.4.3 Caste and Social Equality

Guru was one of the earliest and most vocal critics of caste discrimination in Kerala. His poems 'Jāti Mīmāṃs' and 'Jātinirṇayam' directly deconstruct the idea that caste is determined by birth. His poetic voice became an instrument for educating society about the falseness of caste hierarchies and the need for a just social order.

1.1.4.4 Devotion and Spiritual Surrender

Guru's devotional works are unique in that they reject ritualism and focus on internal purity and divine unity. In 'Daiva Dasakam', he symbolises human life as a voyage across a stormy sea, with God as the guide: 'You are the captain, and your feet the ship, Without your grace, we surely slip.' This metaphor merges bhakti (devotion) with jnana (knowledge), making his poems spiritually holistic.

1.1.4.5 Ethical Living and Moral Conduct

Guru did not isolate spiritual progress from ethical living. His shorter poems, such as 'Sadvritta Pallattu' and 'Dharmapadam', deescribe honesty, humility, and temperance. His statement on alcohol: 'Do not make, do not give, do not drink liquor, It is poison,' (Liquor is poison; make it not, sell it not; drink it not) illustrates his commitment to social ethics and public health.

1.1.5 Mystical Vision in Guru's Poetry

Guru's devotional poetic world constitutes an extensive collection of hymns, encompassing various manifestations such as Śivan (ശിവൻ), Devi, Vishnu (Krishna), Bāhuleyan (ബാഹുലേയൻ), Gaṇapati (ഗണപതി), and Bhadrakāli (ഭദ്രകാളി). A continuous rhythm of the ḍamaru (ഡമരു അഥവാ ഉടുക്ക്) resonates through these forms. From concise poetic forms like 'Śivaprasāda Pañcakam' (ശിവപ്രസാദ പഞ്ചകം), 'Sadāśivadarśanam'

(സദാശിവദർശനം), 'Cidambarāṣṭakam' (ചിദംബരാഷ്ടകം), and 'Ardhanārīśvara Stavam' (അർദ്ധനാരീശ്വരസ്തവം) to the elaborate work 'Śivaśatakam' (ശിവ ശതകം), Guru's poetic investment is evident at various levels of his mystical vision. Engaging with the infinite is indeed a defining feature of both devotional and yogic poetry. Prof. Sukumar Azhikode, in his preface to the first volume of the complete works of Narayana Guru, explicated by Prof. G. Radhakrishnan Nair, remarked that when Narayana Guru began his quest for truth in his youth, he had no focused programmes at hand and was immersed in total devotion (Bhakti). It was at this phase of his life that he composed these hymns to glorify these deities. Bhakti is the quintessence of these verses, glorified with rhythm, music, and mystical meaning. Rabindranath Tagore, on another occasion, also remarked upon Guru's profound vision.

Rabindranath Tagore once remarked about Guru's profound vision, noting how 'those mystic eyes fixing their gaze on a far remote point in the distant horizon' reflect a spiritual depth beyond ordinary perception. The transcendental visions Guru expenanced in his spiritual growth until he attained self realisation echo throughout his mystic poetry. Consider the concluding half-verse from Sadāśivadarśanam (സദാശിവദർശനം): The following translations are by Muttath Sudha.

അടിക്കു പന്നി പോയി
നിന്മുടിക്കൊരന്നവും പറ-
അടുത്തു കണ്ടതില്ല
നിന്നെയിന്നുമഗ്നിശൈലമേ!

(The pigs went away, no beautiful swan is seen coming by flying or swimming nearby on your hair, you took as on to day. The fire mountain; swallowed, me with the whole body curtain. Immediately in a cesvaic dance)

This verse conveys the awe of one who, having fallen at the feet of the divine, still cannot see even the tip of the crown. It captures an overwhelming sense of vastness, a vision of the infinite that defines the very essence of Guru's spiritual imagination. Another depiction of this boundlessness appears in 'Śivaprasāda Pañcakam' (ശിവപ്രസാദപഞ്ചകം):

കളമുണ്ടു കറുത്തതു നീ ഗരളം
കളമുണ്ടതുകൊണ്ട് കൃപാനിധിയേ
കളമുണ്ടൊരു കൊണ്ടലൊടൊത്ത കടൽ-
ക്കളവുണ്ടൊരു സീമ നിനക്കു നഹി.

…… There is a column;
But there is a boundary line
For the black sea also like the rain
clouds;……..

Here, the metaphor of the ocean serves as a central experience and symbol in Guru's poetry. At the very beginning of Śivaprasāda Pañcakam, we encounter:

പൊരുളെന്നുമുടമ്പൊടു മക്കളുയിർ-
ത്തിരളെന്നുമിതൊക്കെയനർത്ഥകരം
കരളിന്നു കളഞ്ഞു കരുംകടലിൽ
പുരളാതെ പൊതിഞ്ഞുപിടിപ്പതു നീ

"By removing those foes to man and God from the mind. So as to avert sticking/ By falling in the black painted waves of the blue ocean." This 'karum kaṭal' (dark ocean) symbolises the sea of worldly impurities. The verb 'potiññu piṭippatu' (envelop and hold) conveys a maternal protective quality that transcends description. The same ocean metaphor reappears in "Daiva Daśakam" (ദൈവദശകം) as 'ആഴമേറും നിൻ മഹസ്സാമാഴി' (In the fathomless ocean of your luster) and in the prose-poem 'Ātmavilāsa' (ആത്മവിലാസം) as 'നി സ്തരംഗ സമുദ്രം' (Thou art the vast ocean). In one context, it represents the hellish ocean of worldly suffering; in another, it becomes the luminous and serene ocean of divine infinitude. As Kumaran Asan expresses in one of his

hymns: 'ആണവക്കടലിലാഴുമേഴ ഞാൻ / ഏണപാണി മകനെന്റെ തമ്പുരാൻ' (I am the helpless submerged in the atomic ocean / and you are protector, son of the Lord). Here, the devotee acknowledges being submerged in the atomic ocean, seeking the hand of the Lord for salvation.

1.1.6 Literary Features of Guru's Poetry

Sree Narayana Guru's literary style is a confluence of classical discipline, vernacular ease, and modern relevance. His control over metre, his creative metaphors, and his openness to new imagery make his poetry aesthetically engaging and philosophically deep.

1.1.6.1 Use of Metaphor and Symbolism

Guru used concrete, everyday images to explain metaphysical ideas. Some notable recurring metaphors include: Lamp with Five Wicks: Symbolising the five senses, always burning with desire. Chariot and Horses: Representing the body and senses, controlled by reason. Sea and Wave: Illustrating the illusion of individuality within the ocean of consciousness. Steamship: An example of modern metaphor representing divine guidance. Each metaphor simplifies profound ideas for wider understanding. The sea imagery is seen vividly in works like 'Śivaprasāda Pañcakam', "Daiva Daśakam", and the prose-poem 'Ātmavilāsa', where the ocean becomes a metaphor for both suffering and divine sublimity.

1.1.6.2 Simplicity and Accessibility

Guru's language is deliberate and precise. While he was fluent in Sanskrit, Tamil, and Malayalam, he consciously used simple, often colloquial Malayalam and Sanskritised Malayalam (it) to make his poems accessible to all. 'If words are harsh, they cause pain; If soft, they leave no scar or stain.' His preference for clarity over complexity made his works widely readable and recitable (memorisable).

1.1.6.3 Musicality and Classical Metrical Forms

Guru employed metres such as 'Anushtubh Anuprasam', 'Yamakam Bhujangaprayatham', Jagati, Shardula Vikridita etc. The rhythmic quality of his verses was intended for recitation and meditation. He also made effective use of devices such as alliteration and assonance to enhance sound beauty. Antyaprasa (end rhyme) for lyrical flow. Repetition and refrains to reinforce key ideas.

1.1.6.4 Integration of Literary Traditions

Guru borrowed from Sanskrit shlokas, Tamil devotional poetry, and Malayalam classical metres. He drew inspiration from Adi Shankara, the Tamil Siddhas, and Buddhist and Jain ethical texts. His poetry reflects a synthetic tradition that is both Indian and universal. Example from Vinayaka Ashtakam: 'Srivaasudeva Saraseeruhapanchajanya– Kaumodakee Bhayanivaarana Chakrapaane...' 'ശ്രീ വാസുദേവ സരസീരുഹപാഞ്ചജന്യ കൗ മോദകീ ഭയനിവാരണ ചക്രപാണേ' Even in these classical forms, he infused a freshness of vision that reflected his reformist spirit.

O! Lord Vasudevan (Vishnu)
You bear in your four celestial arms;
The Lotus flower; Panchajanya, the conch
Kaumodaki, the club
And the holy wheel, to annihilate the
Devotees's fear.

1.1.6.5 Modern Imagery and Language

Guru was not confined to tradition. He referenced 'rail', 'steamship', and 'modern roadways' to draw analogies with spiritual journeys. For example, likening the soul's journey to a railway journey conveys the speed and direction of one's life under divine control. Sree Narayana Guru's poetry is not an isolated literary pursuit but a profound fusion of mysticism, reformist zeal, and philosophical depth. His verses were written with a purpose, to enlighten the masses, awaken society, and express his spiritual realisations. Guru succeeded in using poetry as a transformative medium. Adopting poetic diction as medium, he challenged social norms, dismantled caste barriers, and preached ethical conduct. His poems contributed to Kerala's Renaissance, influenced disciples like Kumaranasan, and inspired thinkers beyond the region (Geographical boundaries).

Even today, Guru's poetry remains a living tradition, recited in homes, temples, and classrooms. It continues to inspire social reform movements, interfaith dialogue, and philosophical reflection. His poetic legacy exemplifies the way how simplicity, when combined with truth and compassion, can attain timeless relevance. In Vedānta, profound metaphysical concepts are typically couched in dense philosophical language. However, Gurudevan enlivens the seeker's inquiry (jijñāsā) by presenting these depths through remarkably simple, accessible, and poetically infused expressions (kāvyātmaka vākkukal), distilled as droplets of honey filled with the bliss of insight (ānandānubhavattinṭe tēṇtuḷḷi). In doing so, Gurudevan's works become, for each individual, a guiding śāstra, a science of inner seeking. Though the various commentaries on Gurudevan's works are each valuable in their own independent views, it is through direct study and contemplation (svādhyāyaṁ and mananaṁ) of the original texts that the seeker gains the greatest benefit. The aim of such study is not to develop rhetorical or doctrinal mastery in order to enlighten others, but rather to dispel the darkness that conceals the inestimable light already shining within.

Gurudevakṛtikhaḷ or works are meant to remove this obscuring darkness caused by the projections and veils of ignorance (āvāraṇa-vikṣēpaṅṅaḷ). As the antaḥkaraṇa (അന്തഃകരണം – inner instrument) becomes purified, the blissful essence (ānandarasaṁ) hidden in Gurudevan's works begins to reveal itself ever more clearly. The more one purifies the inner self, the more luminous this joy becomes. Drinking deeply of this essence, the aspirant moves towards becoming a paramahaṁsa, the realised one. This is the noble purpose (prayōjanaṁ) that Gurudevan's works ultimately uphold. Following the path laid out by Gurudevan's compositions is akin to watching the murky waters begin to clear, the sediment settles, and the clarity gradually emerges. This is the experiential transformation his writings invite: the dissolution of inner confusion and the revelation of innate purity.

1.1.7 The Aim of Guru's Writings

Sree Narayana Guru never undertook literary composition with the deliberate aim of creating literature. For him, literature was merely a medium for presenting his vision of truth (satyadarśanam). If Guru had sought to write literature by following the path of the prevailing neoclassicism or romanticism of his time, Malayalam would never have seen a poet of his stature. As has already been asserted, that a sage (ṛṣi)

and a poet are not two separate entities, when one attempts to understand the poet within Guru, one ultimately arrives at Guru as a sage. 'നാന്യഷിഃ കവിരിത്യുക്ത-മൃഷിശ്ച കില ദർശനാത് ദർശനാത് വർണന ാത് വാപി രൂപാ ലോകേ കവിശ്രുതിഃ വിചിത്ര ഭാവധർമാംശ തത്ത്വ പ്രഖ്യാ ച ദർശനം.', ഭട്ടതൗതൻ, കാവ്യകൗതുകം'. One who is not a ṛṣi cannot be a poet. It is the power of vision (darśanaśakti) that makes one a sage. It is from the abilities of insight and expression that one gains recognition as a poet. Darśanam is the clear articulation of the principles behind variegated emotional and moral elements (vicitra bhāva-dharmāṁśa-tattva-prakhyā). That is to say, it is the clarity concerning the essence of emotions and moral elements. A poet must be a sage. To become a sage, one must have darśanam. This clarity, regarding the essence (tattva) of the manifold emotions and dharmic elements (dharmāṁśa), is what constitutes vision (darśanam).

The term vicitrabhāva refers to emotionally charged states that are rich in nuance. These are prompted by the material objects of the world. Dharma is that which leads to the highest form of both material and spiritual happiness. Darśanam is thus the clear and profound insight into the substance (poruḷ) underlying all worldly objects, the emotional states they engender, and the realisation of both material and spiritual bliss. To analyse the essential nature, behaviour, and innate dharma (svadharma) of every entity in the universe and to articulate that insight with grace and reverence, this is what becomes literature or poetry. Every morning, countless flowers wither away unnoticed. If, through the portrayal of one such fallen flower, one can evoke philosophical reflection on the fundamental problems of human life, that becomes literature. It was near Guru that this transformative process occurred, which elevated Kumaran Asan, who once believed literature to be a mere skilful depiction of the outer beauty of the universe with its stars, buds, constellations, and lotus-eyed maidens, into a mahākavi (great poet). The injunction not to write erotic poetry was Guru's directive. This was Narayana Guru's practical view of poetic purpose. In 'Ātmopadeśaśatakam', Guru says:

ശ്രുതിമുതലാം തുരഗം തൊടുത്തൊരാത്മ-
പ്രതിമയെഴും കരണപ്രവീണനാളും
രതിരഥമേറിയഹന്ത രമ്യരൂപം
പ്രതി പുറമേ പെരുമാറിടുന്നജസ്രം.

The senses such as hearing are like horses; the mind is the charioteer; the ego is the rider the libido is the chariot that moves forward, engaging with objects of beauty as it proceeds (Trans: Nataraja Guru)

ഒരു രതി തന്നെയഹന്തയിന്ദ്രിയാന്തഃ-
കരണകളേബരമെന്നിതൊക്കെയായി
വിരിയുമിതിന്നു വിരാമമെങ്ങു, വേറാ-
മറിവവനെന്നറിവോളമോർത്തിടേണം

The one libido manifests as the 'I' sense, the senses, the inner instruments, the body and all these. When these are unraveled, the knower alone remains; (Trans: Nataraja Guru) (Ātmopadeśaśatakam 69–70) The horses, beginning with the sense of hearing (śruti), represent the five senses (pañcendriyāṅgaḷ). The chariot to which these horses are yoked is the body. The soul (ātman), depicted as a statue or unmoving witness (pratima), resides in the chariot. The charioteer is the inner instrument (antaḥkaraṇam). According to the will of the charioteer, the five horses (the senses) move along. Guru likens the self, engrossed in sensory pleasures and journeying through the path illuminated by the inner instrument, to this pratima. But this pratima is not merely inert; it is a passive experiencer, a mere enjoyer (bhoktā), immersed in the beauty of the world and steering the horses of the senses accordingly. However, what happens

when this empirical truth, the universe, is recognised as identical with the self (ātman)? The following verse clarifies this. The ahantā (sense of 'I) and all the faculties, senses, mind, and body, are expansions of one and the same bliss (rati). Until this knowledge arises, the knower remains separate. The distinction between the subject and the object, the perceived beauty and the joy of experiencing it, holds only as long as the perceiver remains apart. There is a joy that arises when one realises the non-duality of everything, when nothing is separate from anything else. This is the bliss of the ātman. When this blissful essence is expressed in poetry, the joy of poetry (kāvyānanda) becomes one with the bliss of Brahman (brahmānanda). The one who realises this joy is a seer, a sage. This power of vision (darśanaśakti) is what makes one a ṛṣi. As Bhaṭṭatauta says: "Ṛṣiśca kila darśanāt", It is through vision that one becomes a ṛṣi. Therefore, even in the search for the poet within Guru, we inevitably arrive at the sage within Guru.

The earliest composition available among the complete works of Guru is Sreekrishna Darsanam (1877) (The Vision of Lord Krishna) and his masterpiece work is Atmopadesa Satakam (One hundred verdses of selfinstructions). This work was composed in 1897, when Guru started his meditative life at Aruvippuram in the third phase after affirm self realisation. It was first recorded by the devotees and disciples word by word from Guru in many theme. There verses in fragments were collected (consolidated) and published in Vivekodayam. Guru made the final corrections and was published by Advaita Asram (The Holy Hermitage for non dualistic thought, Aluva, in 1917)

Recap

- Guru born 1856 Chempazhanthi
- Ezhava community context
- Early schooling in Sanskrit & Ayurveda
- Aruvippuram Śiva consecration 1888
- "One Caste, One Religion…" maxim (One in kind, one in faith)
- Poetry as vehicle for social ethics
- Blend of Tamil, Sanskrit, Malayalam
- Clarity over ornamentation
- Core theme: non-duality (Atman = Brahman)
- Ahimsa poem counters violence

- Compassion as practical ethic
- Use of everyday imagery (steamship, rail)
- Critique of ritualism
- Hymns accessible to illiterate masses
- Influence on disciples (Asan, others)
- Interaction with Kerala Renaissance leaders
- Silence and simplicity in style
- Poems translated into 110+ languages
- Philosophical Upaniṣadic tone
- Self-instruction model (‘Ātmopadeśa Śatakam)
- Ethical imperative behind every stanza
- Modern technology metaphors
- Cross-religious inclusiveness
- Lasting curricular presence
- Foundation for later Dalit aesthetics

Objective Questions

1. What is Guru’s central philosophy?
2. In which year did the Aruvippuram temple consecration take place?
3. In which district was Guru born?
4. What is the title of the famous ten-verse universal prayer by Guru?
5. Which core ethical virtue did Guru emphasise?
6. To which community did Guru belong?

7. What is the name of the hundred-verse self-instructional text by Guru?
8. What reform era in Kerala is Guru associated with?
9. Which disciple-poet of Guru was influenced by Buddhism?
10. What is Guru's poetic language especially known for?

Answers

1. Advaita
2. 1888
3. Thiruvananthapuram
4. Daivadasakam
5. Ahimsa
6. Ezhava
7. 'Ātmopadeśa Śatakam'
8. Renaissance
9. Asan
10. Clarity

Assignments

1. Analyse how Guru fuses poetic imagery with Advaitic thought.
2. Discuss the social impact of "One Caste, One Religion, One God." (One in kind, one in faith, one in Good)
3. Evaluate the role of silence and brevity in Guru's poetic craft.
4. Compare Guru's ahimsa ideal with contemporary global pacifist movements.
5. Trace the reception of Guru's early poems in vernacular print culture

BLOCK - 1

UNIT

Classification of Guru's Poetry

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- list Guru's five principal poetic categories with examples
- distinguish devotional Stotram from didactic Anuśāsanam
- explain how translation (Vivartanam) extended Guru's reach
- assess the pedagogic value of his prose Gadya works.

Prerequisites

The Evolution of Malayalam Poetry in the Late 19th Century and the emergence of Sree Narayana Guru's unique voice occurred in the same period. The late 19th century marked a transformative era in Malayalam poetry, characterised by the confluence of diverse aesthetic movements that redefined literary expression in Kerala. Neo-Classical Tradition was spearheaded by Kerala Varma Valiya Koil Thampuran, often hailed as the "Kalidasa of Kerala," this movement emphasised classical themes and forms. His works, deeply rooted in Sanskrit literary traditions, sought to infuse Malayalam poetry with the grandeur and discipline of classical literature. Kerala Varma's contributions laid a foundational framework that bridged traditional Sanskrit poetics with the evolving Malayalam literary landscape. Contrasting the rigidity of classical norms, the Venmani School, led by poets like Venmani Achhan Nambudiripad and Venmani Mahan Nambudiripad, championed simplicity and colloquial expressions. Their poetry, characterised by humor and

accessibility, resonated with the common populace, making literature more inclusive and reflective of everyday life. The Romantic movement, influenced by Western literary trends, found its voice in poets like A.R. Raja Raja Varma. Known as the "Kerala Panini" for his grammatical works, Varma's poetry embraced imagination, emotion, and individualism, challenging traditional poetic norms and introducing a new lyrical quality to Malayalam literature. Amidst these dynamic literary currents, Sree Narayana Guru emerged as a singular force, infusing Malayalam poetry with profound spiritual depth, philosophical inquiry, and a clarion call for social reform.

Key themes

Stotram, Darśanam, Anuśāsanam, Vivartanam, Gadya, Bhakti, Pedagogy

Discussion

1.2.1 Sree Narayana Guru's Poetic Contributions: A Confluence of Devotion, Philosophy, and Social Reform

Sree Narayana Guru (1855–1928), revered as a spiritual philosopher, social reformer, and literary luminary, made indelible contributions to Indian literature through his profound poetic works. Composed in Malayalam, Sanskrit, and Tamil, his poetry seamlessly integrates devotional fervor, philosophical depth, and a clarion call for social justice, reflecting his holistic vision for humanity.

1.2.1.1 Classification of Guru's Poetry

Dr.T. Bhaskaran, a distinguished scholar, categorisерises Guru's poetic work into five distinct types:

- **Stotram (Devotional Hymns):** These hymns express deep devotion and are often dedicated to various deities.
- **Darshanam (Philosophical Contemplations)**: Poems that deals with the metaphysical concepts and spiritual introspection.
- **Anushasanam (Didactic Instructions)**: Compositions aimed at guiding individuals towards ethical and spiritual upliftment.
- **Vivartanam (Translations)**: Guru's efforts to make seminal philosophical texts accessible to a broader audience.
- **Gadyam (Prose Compositions)**: Prose works that encapsulate his philosophical and social ideals.

Sree Narayana Guru's literary corpus encompasses a diverse range of writings that can be further categoriserised into eight distinct groups, each reflecting his multifaceted engagement with spirituality, philosophy, and social reform:

Vishnu Stotras (വിഷ്ണു സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ): Devotional hymns dedicated to Lord Vishnu, expressing deep reverence

and spiritual insight.

Devi Stotras (ദേവീസ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ): Hymns venerating the Divine Mother in various forms, highlighting the feminine aspect of the divine.

Subrahmanya Stotras (സുബ്രഹ്മണ്യ സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ): Compositions praising Lord Subrahmanya (Murugan), reflecting Guru's devotion and the cultural significance of this deity in South India.

Shiva Stotras (ശിവസ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ): Hymns in honour of Lord Shiva, showcasing Guru's deep engagement with Shaivism and its philosophical underpinnings.

Prabodhana Krithikal (പ്രബോധന കൃതികൾ): Didactic works aimed at awakening spiritual consciousness and promoting ethical living among the masses.

Darshanika Krithikal (ദാർശനിക കൃതികൾ): Philosophical treatises articulating Guru's vision of non-duality (Advaita) and his interpretations of Vedantic principles.

Tharjjamakal (തർജ്ജമകൾ): Translations of seminal texts from Sanskrit and Tamil into Malayalam, making classical wisdom accessible to a broader audience.

Gadhya Krithikal (ഗദ്യകൃതികൾ): Prose writings encompassing essays, discourses, and letters that address social issues, spiritual topics, and practical guidance for day to day life. This classification underscores the breadth and depth of Sree Narayana Guru's literary contributions, reflecting his commitment to spiritual enlightenment, social upliftment, and the dissemination of knowledge across linguistic and cultural boundaries. His works continue to inspire and guide individuals seeking a harmonious blend of devotion, wisdom, and social responsibility. This classification highlights the multifaceted nature of Guru's literary endeavors, each serving a specific purpose in his mission to enlighten and uplift the society.

1.2.1.2 The Literary Works of Sree Narayana Guru in Malayalam, Sanskrit and Tamil

Emphasis on Devotional Hymns and Didactic Poems: Among these categories, Guru's Stotram and Anushasanam stand out for their spiritual depth and ethical guidance.

- **Anukampa Dasakam (അനുകമ്പാദശകം):** Through ten verses, Guru highlights the significance of empathy and kindness in human interactions, promoting a life of moral integrity.
- **Notable Devotional Hymns (Stotram/Universal Prayers) 'Daiva Dasakam' (ദൈവദശകം):** Composed in 1914, this universal prayer comprises ten verses that seek divine guidance and emphasise the unity of humanity. It reflects Guru's vision of a society free from caste and religious divisions. Though it appears to be simple in its form, it conveys deep no – dualistic spiritual plasterophyphating under his mystical composition. There are two such prayers in the gadhya prardhana which can apthy be branded univfersal under, they are instead of devotional hymns or mysticl philosophic countings.
- **Shiva Shatakam (ശിവശതകം):** A hundred-verse hymn extolling Lord Shiva, reflecting Guru's deep engagement with Shaivism.
- **Swanubhava Giti (സ്വാനുഭവ**

ഗീതി): A song of self-experience, blending devotional elements with introspective insights.

- **Shiva Prasada Panchakam (ശിവപ്രസാദപഞ്ചകം):** Five verses highlighting the grace of Lord Shiva.
- **Kolatheereshastavam (കോല തീരേശസ്തവം):** A hymn dedicated to the deity of the Kolathukara temple.
- **Pindanandi (പിണ്ഡനന്ദി):** Verses expressing gratitude for the physical body and life.
- **Ardhanareeshwara Stovam (അർദ്ധനാരീശ്വരസ്തവം):** Five verses praising the androgynous form of Shiva and Parvati.
- **Shivastavam (ശിവസ്തവം):** A hymn venerating Lord Shiva.
- **Chijjada Chintanam (ചിജ്ജഡ ചിന്തനം):** Reflections on consciousness and matter.
- **Kundalini Pattu (കുണ്ഡലി നിപ്പാട്ട്):** Seventeen verses with refrains, focusing on the concept of Kundalini energy. Significant Didactic Poems (Anushasanam)
- **Jeevakarunya Panchakam (ജീവകാരുണ്യപഞ്ചകം):** This five-verse poem underscores the importance of compassion towards all living beings, advocating non-violence and empathy.
- **Jathi Nirnayam (ജാതിനിർണ്ണയം):** This work challenges the rigid caste system, asserting the fundamental equality of all human beings and advocating social reform. Philosophical Contemplations (Darshanam) Guru's philosophical poems can be divided into metaphysical concepts and spiritual introspection, reflecting his Advaitic worldview.
- **Advaita Deepika (അദ്വൈത ദീപിക):** A treatise illuminating the principles of non-dualism.
- **Atmopadesa Shatakam (ആത്മോപദേശശതകം):** One hundred-verses (one hundred stanzas) composition offering self-instruction and introspection.
- **Arivu (അറിവ്):** Fifteen verses discussing the nature and pursuit of knowledge. Guru's writings exhibit an integration of Buddhist principles, particularly the emphasis on compassion (karuna) and non-violence (ahimsa). While it is challenging to ascertain the chronological adoption of Buddhist ideas by Guru and his contemporary Kumaran Asan, both figures significantly contributed to embedding these principles in Malayalam literature. Asan's translation of Edwin Arnold's "Light of Asia" into Malayalam in 1913 played a pivotal role in introducing Buddhist philosophy to the region.

1.2.1.3 Social Reform and Literary Expression

Guru's literary works were instrumental in his social reform initiatives. The Atmopadesa Shatakam (ആത്മോപദേശശതകം), composed around 1897, emphasises self-realisation and inner purity as pathways to social harmony. His efforts to dismantle caste barriers are evident in his poetic advocacy for a society where "one caste, one religion, one God for humanity" (One in kind, one in faith, one in God is men / Of one same womb, Jathi Nirnayam- Determination of Caste) (Oru Jathi, Oru Matham, Oru Daivam, Manushyanu) prevails. Sree Narayana Guru's poetry stands as a testament to his multifaceted genius, seamlessly integrating devotion, philosophy, and social consciousness. His works

continue to inspire and guide generations, embodying the timeless values of unity, compassion, and self-realisation.

1.2.1.4 Guru's Poetry in Malayalam Literary History

Unlike his contemporaries, Guru's compositions transcended mere aesthetic pursuits; they became vehicles for advocating equality, challenging caste hierarchies, and promoting universal brotherhood. His poetic works, such as "'Daiva Dasakam'" and "Atmopadesa Satakam," not only resonated with the masses but also profoundly influenced contemporaries and disciples. Notably, Kumaru, a disciple, Guru found out as a poetic talent in 1981 at the age of 18 was extended all facilities for educational prospects to mould him as the celebrated writer, Kumaran Asan, one of the triumvirate poets of modern Malayalam literature, was deeply inspired by Guru's teachings.

Asan's poetry, imbued with moral and spiritual themes, reflects the transformative impact of Guru's philosophy. The assistance and support that Dr. P. Palpu extended to Guru for Asan's higher education cannot go unmentioned in this context. Palpu was later the key figure who influenced Guru to establish the SNDP Yogam in 1903—one of the principal organisations that led agitations for the formation of an egalitarian Kerala society, as envisioned by Guru in collabouration with Kumaran Asan. Asan served as its founding Secretary, with Guru himself as President. Asan also launched the print journal *Vivekodayam* as the organisation's mouthpiece, to publish their views in the struggle against caste hierarchy.

Similarly, poets like Ulloor S. Parameswara Iyer and Vallathol Narayana Menon were contemporaries who, while charting their own literary paths, operated within the broader milieu influenced by Guru's reformist ideals. Vallathol, for instance, combined nationalism with poetic expression, contributing to the cultural renaissance of Kerala.

1.2.1.5 Reception and Legacy

Guru's Malayalam hymns, especially those dedicated to deities like Subrahmanya, Devi, and Shiva, garnered widespread acclaim. The universal appeal of ''Daiva Dasakam'' (ദൈവദശകം) transcended religious and caste boundaries, becoming a staple in communal prayers. His Shaivite hymns, such as Shiva Shatakam (ശിവശതകം) and Shiva Prasada Panchakam (ശിവപ്രസാദ പഞ്ചകം), reflect a deep engagement with the divine, while compositions like Jathi Nirnayam (ജാതിനിർണ്ണയം) underscore his commitment to social equality. Sree Narayana Guru's Malayalam poetry stands as a testament to his multifaceted genius, seamlessly integrating devotion, philosophy, and social consciousness. His works continue to inspire and guide generations, embodying the timeless values of unity, compassion, and self-realisation. Guru has explicitly stated, "Tattvaththil nāṁ Śaṅkarane pinṯutarunnu" (ജാതി നിർണ്ണയംതത്ത്വത്തിൽ നാം ശങ്കരനെ പിന്തുടരുന്നു), "In philosophy, we follow Śaṅkara." However, this does not imply that Guru merely reiterated what Śaṅkara had already said. Śaṅkarācārya primarily expressed his philosophical vision through his commentaries (bhāṣyas) on the prasthāna-traya (i.e., the Upaniṣads, Bhagavad Gītā, and Brahmasūtras).

In contrast, Guru did not write commentaries on any such foundational texts. Instead, he authored original works that stand as primary texts in their own right. He articulated his vision of truth (satyadarśanam) clearly in three

languages: Malayalam, Sanskrit, and Tamil. A close examination of these works reveals a number of distinct philosophical contributions, scattered throughout the texts, that are unmistakably his own. To sum up, Adi Sankara's view focuses Brahman as the only reality in this wold of illution (Maya). At the same time Narayana Guru conceived Brahman and Atman to be one, as the divine stuff is a constitutent in all beings. While Adi Sankara's philosophy was rooted in the commentaries gave on the Upaniṣads and the vedantic texts, Narayana Guru, inspired by the vedantic texts expressed the ideas in an accessible language through his independent works. They were easily comprehensible while Adi Sanakara's commentaries needed good scholarship for understanding them.

Among Guru's Malayalam compositions, the most prominent is 'Ātmopadeśa Śatakam'. It is in this work that Guru presents his vision of truth in a comprehensive manner. One sees, throughout the text, the subtle philosophical expressions of his vision and how they bring fulfilment to human life and merge into a state of harmony (samarasa). Svānubhava Gīti, composed in Tamil, is a work in which Guru expresses his realisation of Śiva-jñāna in a style reminiscent of the Tiruvācakam. Philosophers seek the revelation of the truth concerning life and the cosmos in it. In attempting to do so, they are inevitably required to approach truth from a particular perspective.

Although truth is one, what one directly apprehends depends on the standpoint from which it is viewed and reviewed. Thus, while the truth remains singular, it may be perceived in multiple perspectives/aspects. It is through this method, viewing the non-dual ultimate reality (advaya paramātma satyam) from ten different philosophical standpoints, that Guru composed Darśanamāla in Sanskrit. This style of exposition, of presenting the same ultimate truth from multiple perspectives, appears to be unprecedented in both Western and Eastern philosophical traditions. Guru's corpus, consisting of around sixty works in the beginning (recently more works have been traced out), may be categorised into philosophical works (dārśanika kṛtikaḷ), devotional hymns (stotra kṛtikaḷ), didactic or instructional compositions (udbōdhana-pradhānakṛtikaḷ), translations (tarjjamakaḷ), and prose works (gadyakṛtikaḷ). Within the philosophical texts, one can often discern the play of a great poet's imaginative vision. Most of the stotra kṛtikaḷ were composed in the earlier stages of Guru's literary life. It is in these devotional hymns that Guru's poetic sensibility moves most freely and independently.

1.2.2 Philosophical Poems

Guru's philosophical poetry forms the backbone of his literary oeuvre, encapsulating the essence of his Advaita Vedanta vision and his exploration of the Self and the universe. These poems engage deeply with metaphysical questions, offering profound insights into the nature of reality, the illusion of duality, and the path to spiritual realisation. In simple language, Guru conveys subtle philosophical truths, making them comprehensible for the common person without diluting their depth. His major philosophical works include one hundred-verse treatises as well as shorter hymns of knowledge, all of which reflect a quest to articulate the oneness of existence and the means to experience that Śatakam*. Ātma-upadeśa Śatakam is Guru's seminal philosophical work – a set of one hundred verses on Self-instruction – and is often considered his magnum opus in Malayalam.

Composed around 1897 in a unique metre called Mṛgendramukham, Ātma-upadeśa Śatakam exemplifies Guru's mastery of mixing sound and sense: its complements its profound content. The title literally means 'One Hundred Lessons to the Self,' and indeed, in these verses Guru addresses the human condition, the bondage to the senses, the illusory nature of the world, and the Ātma-upadeśam, Guru employs a series of vivid meta Advaitic concepts . One central image is that of the lamp with five wicks, representing the five senses. 'The lamp has five senses are always burning. It is engrossed in the subjects of the senses'. Here the ever-burning lamp symbolises the minds pursuits, diverting the seeker from realising the eternal Self within. Another striking metaphor is the ocean and the wave, illustrating the relationship between the individual soul and the Absolute. 'The wave rises, but it is water, It falls, yet remains water, The self is ever the same, which changes not'. Just as a wave is nothing but water taking form, the individual self is in essence not separate from the universal Self. Through such imagery, Guru conveys the non-duality of existence in an intuitive way.

Guru also invokes the traditional Vedāntic analogy of a rope for a snake to explain how ignorance causes illusion: when true knowledge dawns, the illusion vanishes and one realises the substratum beyond metaphors, the text is rich in philosophical insight. It addresses the transience of worldly vision, the futility of ego and desire, and the bliss of Self-realisation. Guru's tone throughout is instructive yet compassionate, as if gently coaching the reader to move towards enlightenment. It is said that Ātma-upadeśa Śatakam is a Malayalam Upaniṣad in spirit, distilling the essence of Advaita for everyday seekers. Indeed, it is regarded as a classic of Guru's philosophy and spirituality, one that proposes a vision of egalitarianism and oneness: the idea that the divine Self is present in all beings equally. Modern commentators have lauded this work not only for its content but also for its literary quality. For instance, it is noted as a 'spiritual work' and a literary masterpiece, blending sound and meaning seamlessly. The accessible language of the verses and the use of everyday analogies allowed even for those outside elite circles to engage with profound philosophy. In effect, Ātma-upadeśa Śatakam fulfilled Guru's aim of awakening minds: it taught Advaita Vedanta's unity of Brahman and Ātman in a way that a common man could understand and meditate upon.

1.2.2.1 Darsanamālā

Darsanamālā is another major philosophic work Sree Narayana Guru composed around 1916 in Sanskrit. Translated as 'Garland of Visions,' the composition presents the essence of Advaita Vedanta through a series of ten Cantos, Canto comprised of 10 stanzas comprising of 100 stanzas in total. Conveying the philosophical 'visions' or perspectives on the Absolute Truth. This structure is highly symmetrical: Guru meant to present, in one cohesive work, 'all possible visions of the Absolute' written in a relatively simple Sanskrit meter, Darsan (the vision) is ancient Upaniṣadic wisdom and Guru restates it in terms suited to the modern age. Each chapter of ten verses examines reality from a differing philosophical vantage points. For example, one chapter discusses illusory superimposition – how the universe is superimposed on the substratum Brahman – while another deals with the subsequent cancellation of illusion. There are chapters on Māyā, on Yoga, on Bhakti, and ultimately on Nirvāṇa, among others

equally important ones.

Through these, Guru examines ten different paths or approaches to the Divine or Self seeker to intuitively perceive the one ineffable Reality from multiple angles, underscoring that Truth is one even if approached from different angles. A notable aspect of Darsanamālā is its didactic clarity. The work opens by reflecting on the world's nature, asserting its origin in the Absolute and its illusory quality, much like a magician's trick. As it progresses, it affirms the supreme oneness of existence, aligning with the core Advaita teaching that Brahman alone is real. Guru also uses metaphors here – for instance, describing the world's emergence 'as though the universe were waking from sleep' to illusion. The language, while Sanskrit, is straightforward and devoid of unnecessary ornamentation, reflecting Guru's desire to teach rather than merely impress. This text has been described as a 'hitherto uncharted method of viewing the non-dual Brahman from ten different philosophical vantage points,' essentially bridging ancient philosophy with a scientific mindset of inquiry.

Darsanamālā resonates with contemporary readers by connecting Vedantic ideas with rational understanding, serving as a succinct yet profound manual of Advaita philosophy.. It is both a companion to Ātma-upadeśa Śatakam and a standalone exposition. If Ātma-upadeśa is the inward personal instruction, Darsanamālā is the structured philosophical foundation – a text that a serious student of Vedanta could study to grasp the many facets of non-dualism. Guru's decision to write it in Sanskrit also indicated his wish to make a dialogue with the broader Indian philosophical tradition, placing his insights alongside those of ancient sages. Today, Darsanamālā is studied with commentaries, and its translator-disciple Nataraja Guru and others have rendered detailed expositions. It remains a testament to Narayana Guru's status as both a philosopher and a poet – one who could 'leave the student-seeker to intuitively perceive on one's own, the one Reality' through those suggestive verses.

1.2.2.2 Jñāna Sūktams and Other Philosophical Verses

In addition to his two famous hundred-verse treatises, Guru composed several shorter philosophical poems and sūktams that reinforce key Advaitic and ethical ideas. These works often served a dual purpose: guiding individuals toward Self-realisation and simultaneously promoting a universal philosophy of equality and oneness in society. A few notable examples include:

Viveka Cūḍāmaṇi: Guru prepared a Malayalam translation of Viveka Cūḍāmaṇi, the renowned Sanskrit text attributed to Adi Shankaracharya. Viveka Cūḍāmaṇi is a dense philosophical text expounding the path to enlightenment. Guru's translation was not a word-for-word literal rendering, but a careful interpretation aiming to make Shankara's ideas intelligible to Malayali readers. In doing so, he simplified complex concepts of Viveka and presented them clearly in Malayalam. This work shows Guru in the role of a philosophical communicator, breaking down high Advaita Vedanta for the common man.

Advaita Dīpikā: This is a brief original composition by Guru, often translated as 'Lamp of Non-duality.' In a handful of verses, Guru illuminates the essence of Advaita – for instance, emphasizing that the visible world is like a dream and only the substratum of consciousness is ultimately real. The verses encourage the reader to look beyond names and

forms to the singular reality that underlies everything. Advaita Dīpikā exemplifies Guru's ability to condense philosophy: much like a lamp lighting a room at once, these short verses light up the mind with the idea of unity.

Swanubhava Gīti: In this Malayalam poem, Guru lyrically describes the state of Self-realisation. It's more of a mystical poem than a systematic treatise – Guru shares in simple language the joy and peace of one established in the true Self. Such a poem bridges philosophy and devotion, as the experience of non-duality is described in almost devotional terms. Though not lengthy, Swanubhava Gīti complements the more analytical works by giving a taste of realisation in poetic form. Many of these shorter works highlight the practical implications of Advaita. For example, Guru's non-dualism isn't merely metaphysical but also social – he frequently uses these poems to break down barriers like caste and creed, insisting that if 'the Self is one in all, divisions such as caste are baseless.' In one translation of a short verse, he writes: 'By acts alone the caste is known, not birth… The one who knows the Self supreme is Brahmin the true, beyond the scheme.' Such lines from works like Jātinirṇayam have a philosophical underpinning; they derive the idea of human equality from the unity of the Self.

Thus, Guru's philosophical verses, whether in the form of original aphorisms or translations of revered texts, consistently reinforce a few key points: the oneness of reality, the need for inner purification and discernment, and the rejection of false distinctions. They are concise but potent, often memorised and recited by his disciples. Each serves as a 'mantra' of wisdom, intended to guide one's contemplation. These smaller works, beyond his major treatises, were crucial in extending Sree Narayana Guru's Advaitic message to diverse audiences, from unlettered villagers to Sanskrit scholars. Collectively, they highlight Guru's dual role as both a sage and a social reformer, demonstrating how he dismantled the barriers between spiritual liberation and social emancipation.

1.2.3 Core Philosophical Themes across His Poems

Across all the philosophical poems of Guru, certain core themes recur, forming the foundation of his teachings. These themes are tightly interwoven – metaphysical insight is always paired with ethical and practical import.

a. **Illusory Nature of the World:** Guru frequently reminds readers that the world as we perceive it is transient and often deceptive. Just as a rope can be mistaken for a snake in dim light, our ignorance makes us take the history world as ultimately real. This is not to deny the world's existence, but to assert that clinging to it leads to suffering. By recognizing the world's fleeting nature, one can live in the world without attachment. Guru's poems often advise detachment and discrimination as essential virtues.

b. **True Knowledge is Experiential:** While Guru's verses are instructional, he consistently warns that intellectual understanding is not enough. Real knowledge is to experience or realise the truth directly in one's own self. For example, many verses in Ātma-upadeśa Śatakam read almost like meditation instructions, nudging the seeker to look within and discover the truth beyond mind and senses. Guru, being a mystic, spoke from experience – he had attained the state of blessedness, and

his poems encourage others to seek that inner experience rather than stop at bookish knowledge. In one of his concise Malayalam verses, Guru writes: 'As one who tastes sugar knows its sweetness, so must you taste the Self to know it – mere talk will not do.'.

c. **Liberation through Self-Knowledge:** All of Guru's philosophical poetry converges on the goal of moksha, or liberation. Liberation is depicted not as a post-mortem heaven but as a state of enlightenment here and now, achieved by Self-realisation. When one realises one's true nature as non-dual Consciousness, one is freed from the bonds of ignorance, fear, and sorrow. Guru often describes the liberated state as one of bliss and peace. Notably, he presents moksha in universal terms – it is not bound to any one religion or sect, but attainable by anyone who follows the path of knowledge, ethics, and meditation. This universality ties back to his social message: moksha is everyone's birth right.

d. **Compassion and Non-violence as Natural Outcomes:** Although these might seem more ethical than metaphysical, Guru insists they are direct outcomes of true wisdom. When one sees the Self in all creatures, ahimsa and compassion automatically arise. In Ātma-upadeśa Śatakam, one sub-theme is that the illumined sage beholds all beings in himself and therefore cannot act with cruelty. Guru's philosophical verses often end on an ethical note; the proof of spiritual understanding is a life of love, non-violence, and service. This integration of philosophy and compassion later blossoms fully in his explicitly instructional poems like Anukampadaśakam. In short, for Guru, Advaita is not an abstract doctrine – it is a vision that transforms how we treat others. Seeing unity, one becomes humble, kind, and fearless. These core themes make Guru's philosophical poetry a guide not just to knowledge but to living. They break the barrier between philosophy and day-to-day conduct. The unity of existence, when realised, must reflect in unity among people; the illusoriness of the world should reflect in simplicity and detachment in life; the pursuit of knowledge must reflect in tolerance and dialogue; the pursuit of liberation must co-exist with working for the upliftment of others. This holistic philosophy is what made Narayana Guru a unique poet-saint – and it is why his philosophical poems are read not only for insight but for inspiration in ethical and social realms.

1.2.4 Devotional Poems

Sree Narayana Guru's devotional poems are eloquent expressions of his inclusive and universal approach to spirituality. While rooted in the Bhakti tradition of Hinduism, Guru's hymns transcend narrow ritualism and present deities as symbols of higher spiritual truths accessible to all. In these works, Guru assumes the voice of a devotee, but one notices that his devotion is suffused with philosophy. The gods and goddesses addressed are not tribal deities conferring favour on one community over another; rather, they are manifestations of the one Divine, approachable through love and surrender. Guru composed devotional verses in Sanskrit, Malayalam, and even Tamil, addressing almost every major deity of the Hindu pantheon, from Ganesha and Subrahmanya to Lord Shiva, Lord Vishnu, and the Divine Mother. Through these poems, he also subtly conveyed messages of equality – for instance, he

would extol the Divine Mother's presence in all women, or Lord Shiva's presence in all creatures. Many of Guru's devotional works are in the form of 'aṣṭakams' or 'daśakams', traditional formats in Sanskrit and regional languages for praising deities. Notable among them are the following:

1.2.4.1 Vināyaka Aṣṭakam

Vināyaka Aṣṭakam is a Sanskrit hymn composed by Sree Narayana Guru in the 1880s, dedicated to Lord Gaṇeśa, the remover of obstacles and symbol of wisdom. Structured in eight verses, it praises Gaṇeśa's qualities, his generosity, his power to dispel hindrances, and his embodiment of knowledge. While rich in classical devotional imagery, the hymn is underpinned by philosophical depth. Gaṇeśa is not merely invoked as a granter of worldly boons but as Jñānāpāraga, one who leads beyond knowledge.

Guru presents Gaṇeśa as signifying the primal sound (Om), symbolic of Brahma, the light that dispels ignorance, and to guide us along the path of truth, thus framing him as a universal, non-sectarian symbol of inner awakening. The ornate yet accessible Sanskrit makes it suitable for liturgical recitation, aligning with temple traditions. Notably, the hymn culminates not in material requests, but in a prayer for liberation from ego, delusion, and inertia, so that true wisdom may arise. This transforms the hymn into a spiritual guide, devotional in tone, yet rooted in self-realisation. It exemplifies Guru's unique approach: fusing bhakti with inner awakening.

1.2.4.2 Subrahmaṇya Aṣṭakam

In Subrahmaṇya Aṣṭakam, composed in Malayalam, Sree Narayana Guru praises Lord Subrahmaṇya (Murugan), the youthful deity of divine knowledge and valour. Reflecting the strong South Indian devotion to Murugan, the hymn is likely to have arosed from Guru's personal reverence, evident in his establishment of a Subrahmaṇya temple at Aluva. Across eight verses, the deity is invoked as the remover of impurities (sakala doṣa nivārana) and the embodiment of auspiciousness (śubha maṅgala rūpa). A recurring theme is the plea for Subrahmaṇya to reside within the devotee's heart, shifting the focus from external rituals to internal devotion. The Lord is portrayed not only as a divine warrior but also as a compassionate force that removes inner afflictions such as ignorance and fear. By using simple Malayalam, Guru made the hymn accessible to ordinary worshippers, encouraging spiritual practice in one's native tongue. This marked a significant step in making devotional expression more inclusive, allowing common people to connect with the divine without dependence on Sanskrit. The hymn thus blends devotional fervour with spiritual introspection, characteristic of Guru's inclusive vision.

1.2.4.3 Bhadrakāli Aṣṭakam

In Bhadrakāli Aṣṭakam, composed in Sanskrit, Sree Narayana Guru offers devotion to the fierce yet compassionate Goddess Bhadrakāli, widely revered in Kerala for her protective and purifying power. The hymn reflects Guru's adept engagement with Śakti worship, portraying the Goddess as both destroyer of evil and embodiment of auspiciousness. Opening with the syncretic mantra "Om namah Śivāya Devī Bhadrakāli namo namah," Guru integrates Shaivite and Devi traditions, emphasising their unity. Classical verses such as "Sarva maṅgala maṅgalye…" further root the composition in the established Hindu devotional canon. Across eight verses, Bhadrakāli is depicted

wielding weapons to destroy outer evil and inner māyā (illusion), showing the hymn's philosophical depth. Guru also invokes her as Sarva maṅgala and Shive, blending her terrifying form with her nurturing essence. One verse honours her as the divine force within all beings, embodying strength and compassion. Thus, the hymn becomes both a personal prayer and a spiritual teaching, capturing the emotional devotion and universal vision that define Guru's bhakti approach.

1.2.4.4 Śivānanda Lahari

Sree Narayana Guru's Malayalam translation of Śivānanda Lahari, Adi Shankaracharya's revered Sanskrit hymn to Lord Śiva, exemplifies his mission to make spiritual classics accessible to all. Comprising of 100 verses, the original text is a poetic outpouring of devotion, blending bhakti with Advaita philosophy. Guru's rendering simplified the language without diluting the spiritual depth, preserving core metaphors and devotional fervour. His translation included clarifying explanations, making it suitable for everyday worshippers unfamiliar with Sanskrit.

In doing so, Guru honoured Shankara while promoting the non-ritualistic, inner experience of devotion. Taking for granted given that many saw Guru as a manifestation of Śiva, this translation also allowed him to express his own spiritual sentiments. Rather than composing a new hymn, Guru humbly chose to reinterpret a classic, reinforcing the harmony between knowledge (jñāna) and devotion (bhakti). His version serves as both homage and instruction, offering Shankara's vision to a wider audience and strengthening the bridge between classical tradition and modern spirituality.

1.2.4.5 General Devotional Themes and Style

Across all his devotional poems, Guru consistently portrays the deities not as distant beings appeased by ritual, but as universal principles and innate presences. Several general themes emerge.

Universality of God

Whether he is praising Ganesha, Subrahmanya, Shiva, Vishnu or Devi, Guru is ultimately pointing to the one Divine. He often uses different names interchangeably or invokes one deity in the context of another. This reflects his famous teaching of 'One Caste, One Religion, One God for Man' – One in kind, one in faith, one in God is man- in the devotional sphere, it translates to a firm belief that all gods are manifestations of the One and that devotion to any form (to which devotee is most drawn towards) can lead to the same realisation. For Guru, a devotee of Krishna, or Kali, or Murugan – all are on legitimate paths converging to the same truth.

Deities as Embodiments of Virtues

Guru's hymns often highlight what each deity symbolises. Ganesha symbolises wisdom and the removal of ignorance, Subrahmanya symbolises courage and divine knowledge, Bhadrakali embodies protection and the destruction of evil, etc. By focusing on these qualities, Guru subtly teaches devotees to aspire to those virtues. For instance, in worshipping Ganesha as the Lord of Wisdom, one shall be inspired to cultivate wisdom; in praising the Goddess as compassionate Mother, one is inspired to develop compassion oneself etc. In this way, devotion becomes a path of self-improvement and ethical living, not mere idol worship.

a. **Equality and Inclusivity:** Guru's devotional works pointedly avoid any suggestion that one needs to be of a certain caste or background to approach the Divine. This was radical in a society where lower castes were often barred from temple worship. Guru not only opened temples to all but also composed hymns that anyone could sing. In doing so, he gave people a direct access to the divine, cutting out the need for priestly intermediaries. Many Ezhavas and other marginalised community members in Kerala took to singing Guru's Malayalam bhajans, thus participating in bhakti practices that were once the previlage of higher castes. The language choice – using Malayalam for many hymns – itself was an inclusive act, as it said: God understands Malayalam just as well as Sanskrit.

b. **Simple, Melodious Language:** Stylistically, Guru's devotional songs, especially those in Malayalam, use a musical, straightforward diction. They were meant to be sung, so they often have a rhythmic, lyrical quality. Even when in Sanskrit, he favoured simpler meters and commonly known epithets. This ensured that the emotional impact was not lost in verbal complexity. A peasant could hum or chant parts of these hymns while working, absorbing in their essence even if every word was not understood. The accessibility of his bhakti poetry greatly contributed to its popularity.

c. **Inner Devotion over Outer Ritual:** A subtle critique of ritualism runs through Guru's devotional corpus. He rarely mentions about offerings, sacrifices, or elaborate puja details in his hymns. Instead, the focus is on meditations inner prayer, surrender, and moral purity. In "Daiva Dasakam", for example, the devotee asks God to steer his life – it's about guidance and surrender, not about fulfilling ritual requirements. Guru teaches that true bhakti is a matter of the heart. This theme is aligned with the ethos of broader Bhakti movement, but Guru applied it incisively to a society tangled in ceremonial excess.

He guided people to the core of devotion: love of God and service to humanity are ways how one can aligh life to divine service. Acts that one performs for ones own sake/ should also aim for the good of the other men. (അവനവനാത്മസുഖത്തി നാചരിക്കുന്നവ അപരന്നു സുഖത്തിനായി വരേണം, Atmopadesa Satakam).

Sree Narayana Guru's poetic compositions are notable for their innovative stylistic elements. These include the strategic use of figures of speech, experiments with the continuous repetition of vowels begining from 'അ' to 'അം' in successive lines, and the clever incorporation of begining letters from his own name – Narayana Guru – within his verses. While Guru engaged in these and other unique poetic experimentations, Sukumar Azhikode remarked that these efforts, despite their ingenuity, did not ultimately succeed in creating a completely new poetic style in Malayalam.

1.2.4.6 Rejection of Empty Ritualism

While Guru respected traditional devotion, he firmly rejected excessive or meaningless ritualism. This stance is evident both in his life and in his poetry.

In his devotional poems, one finds hints that idol worship and ritual have value only if done with the right understanding. Guru emphasises knowledge and virtue as the true constituents of worship. Even when he sings in praise of the deities, Guru reminds the devotee that the ultimate goal is liberation through Self-understanding, not just prayers for worldly boons or favours from Gods. For example, a line from one of his hymns in translation: 'What is the use of countless rituals if the mind remains impure? O Lord, reside in my heart and purify me with true wisdom.' This encapsulates his view that bhakti and jnana must go hand in hand. Guru subtly critiques practices like animal sacrifice or costly offerings to Gods. In one context, he points out that ahimsa is the highest form worship, a direct challenge.

Recap

- Five-fold classification by scholars
- *Stotram* = devotional hymnsExamples: *Śiva Śatakam*, *'Daiva Daśakam'*
- *Darśanam* = philosophical contemplations
- Prime work: *Darśanamāla*
- *Anuśāsanam* = didactic instructionsEg: *'Jāti Nirṇayam'*, *Jīvakāruṇya Pañcakam*
- *Vivartanam* = translations/ paraphrases Eg: *Īśāvāsya* Upaniṣad into Malayalam
- *Gadya* = prose guidance, letters
- Eight broader thematic clusters listed by T.Bhaskaran
- Integration of Advaita and social ethics
- Hymns written in Sanskrit, Malayalam and Tamil
- Accessibility high priority
- Verses often mantric in cadence
- Devotion and instruction intertwined
- Buddhist influence with a focus on compassion
- Caste critique embedded in didactic texts

- Translation widened scriptural access
- Prose pieces clarify ritual reforms
- Guru avoided Sanskritised obscurity
- Classification aids curriculum design
- Shows versatility across genres
- Proves literature can serve as a practical tool
- Courtyard metaphor reinforces unity
- Readers choose entry suited to need

Objective Questions

1. Who coined the five-category map?
2. What is the term for the didactic sub-genre?
3. What is the title of Guru's philosophical garland text?
4. What is the name of the hymn of ten verses to God?
5. What is the Malayalam translation of the Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad called?
6. What is the name of the verse set on compassion?
7. What are prose writings called?
8. What is the name of the hymn praising Ardhanārīśvara?
9. What is the central spiritual doctrine?
10. What is the Sanskrit word for the translation genre?

Answers

1. Bhaskaran
2. Anuśāsanam
3. Darśanamāla
4. 'Daivadaśakam'
5. Īśāvāsya
6. Jīvakāruṇya
7. Gadya
8. Stotram
9. Advaita
10. Vivartanam

Assignments

1. Evaluate how Guru balances devotion and instruction across genres.
2. Discuss the socio-linguistic significance of his translations.
3. Compare *Darśanamāla* with any Upaniṣadic commentary in method and tone.
4. Analyse the pedagogic strategies in *'Jāti Nirṇayam'*.
5. Explain the role of metre in differentiating *Stotram* and *Darśanam.*

SGOU

BLOCK - 1

UNIT

Guru's Literary Milieu

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- describe key features of Kerala Renaissance that framed Guru's career
- connect Guru's poetry to contemporaneous social movements
- identify literary peers who influenced or were influenced by Guru
- analyse how global events (e.g., WWI) echo in Guru's themes

Prerequisites

Sree Narayana Guru's literary output emerged from a deeply stratified and evolving social landscape in Kerala during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His literary milieu was defined by the interplay of caste oppression, social reform, colonial influence, the emergence of print culture, and the spiritual currents of both indigenous and external traditions. Guru's work responded to and reshaped these conditions, making his writings central to both Malayalam literature and Kerala's socio-cultural transformation.

Guru's lifetime (1856–1928) overlapped with the late colonial period in India. Kerala was then divided into princely states (Travancore, Cochin) and British Malabar. While the region had been exposed to European influences since the 16th century, the 19th century brought deeper colonial administrative control, new educational institutions, and Western-style legal systems. These developments coexisted with feudal and caste-based power structures that rigidly governed social mobility and access to knowledge. The contradictions of colonial modernity and traditional orthodoxy formed the backdrop of Guru's reformist and literary activity.

Key themes

Renaissance, Ayyankali, Print-culture, Modernity, Ahimsa, Dalit-rights, Globalisation

Discussion

1.3.1 Historical and Colonial Context

The late 19th and early 20th centuries were a transformative period in Kerala, marked by the Kerala Renaissance. During this time, intellectual, social, and cultural currents converged to challenge caste oppression, religious orthodoxy, and social stagnation. Sree Narayana Guru emerged from this vibrant milieu, uniquely combining literary output with spiritual and social reform. Guru's poetic voice resonated with the spirit of the times. It aligned with contemporaries like Kumaran Asan – a staunch follower of Guru, Vallathol Narayana Menon, and Ulloor S. Parameswara Iyer, yet it remained distinct. His works reflected the complexities of his age while consistently advocating universal values of equality, compassion, and non-violence.

In Vāṅmaya Gaṅgā Pravāhaṁ, Sajay K.V. states that the sea was profoundly close to both Guru and his disciples, those who meditated on the 'bhavasāgara' (ocean of becoming) while living near the shores like Kāyikkara and Aruvikkara. Even the samasya śloka (riddle-verse) that Guru recited when he first met Kumaran Asan at Kōlaththukara reflects this maritime symbolism: 'കോലത്തുകരെക്കുടി കൊണ്ടരുളും ബാലപ്പിറ ചൂടിയ വാരിധിയേ!' (O! Lord scattering blessings from his posture in Kolathukara, bearing Ganga in his locks adorned with the crescent moon). In the first chapter of Alakaṭalum Neyyāmpalakaḷum, poet Viṣṇunārāyaṇan Nampūtiri elaborates on the poetic depth of this imagery. He notes that in this context, 'vāṟidhi' does not literally mean sea; rather, it points to Kōlatthīrēśan, a form of Parameśvara (Shiva), whom Guru is invoking. The usage is not casual. By stretching the dhātvartha (root meaning) of 'vāṟidhi' as 'seat of the Gaṅgā', the image of Shiva, the one who bears the crescent moon and the Gaṅgā on his locks, emerges. The same interpretation appears in Ardhanārīśvara Stavam, where Guru addresses Shiva as 'Gaṅgānadīdhāmam':

പയ്യാർന്നീ ജനമാഴിയിൽ പതിവതിൻ-
മുന്നേ പരന്നൂഴിയിൽ
പെയ്യാറാകണമേ ഘനാംബു കൃപയാ-
ഗങ്ഗാനദീധാമമേ!

(In the expensive ocean and / on earth hungry and thirst beings, Heavy rain with we wings/ may be showered on us;/ How did it came ? On a compassion, / Oh, the heavenly brilliance of the river./ Ganga, like a non-stop-dance of snowball (Trans. Muttathu Sudha).

While seemingly a conventional invocation, Guru's 'Gaṅgānadīdhāmam' gains profound resonance when understood in its context: a response to parched villagers during a harsh summer.

Here, Guru invokes Shiva not merely as an abode of mercy, but as the very source of water, grace, and hope. The phrase itself resonates with multiple layers of meaning—the sublime, the sustaining,

and the salvific—encapsulating the longing of thirsty people and the trembling of dry tongues. This single invocation beautifully reflects Guru's maharūpakam, or great metaphor, of poetry. His inner life, an Advaitic reservoir, was offered to those scorched by the heat of caste oppression, flowing forth as a literary Ganges (vāṅmaya gaṅgā) that he released upon us.

1.3.2 The Kerala Renaissance and Literary Context

The Kerala Renaissance of the late 19th–early 20th century was a period of unprecedented social, political, and cultural awakening in Kerala. This era saw rigid caste hierarchies and religious orthodoxies being questioned, influenced by colonial education, missionary activities, and global political changes. There was a rise of critical consciousness, calling for social justice, and reform movements that sought to redefine Kerala's social fabric. The Malayalam literary landscape flourished, as poets and writers used literature as a vehicle for social change. Sree Narayana Guru stood at the epicenter of this transformative phase. His poetry, philosophy, and activism embodied Renaissance ideals of reason, equality, and human dignity. Guru's works engaged directly, in the socio-political upheavals of his time, and addressed not only individual spiritual liberation but also collective social emancipation.

1.3.2.1 Contemporary Social Movements and Caste Reform

The social order in Kerala was marked by an extreme form of caste hierarchy, known as Jati and Avarna-Savarna divisions. Communities such as the Ezhavas, to which Guru belonged, were considered Avarna (outside the four-fold caste system), subjected to untouchability and denied access to temple worship, education, and Sanskritic learning. This exclusion was not only social and religious but also literary, classical learning, especially in Sanskrit, was monopolised by the Namboothiri Brahmins and upper-caste elites. Guru's literary voice thus emerged as a revolutionary assertion from a historically silenced space.

During Guru's lifetime, significant caste-based agitations took place that formed the backdrop of his work. For example: In 1907, social reformer Ayyankali attempted to enroll a Dalit girl (Panchami) in a government school, defying caste restrictions. This sparked violent backlash (including the burning of the school) but led to greater resolve for Dalit education rights. It ultimately contributed to Travancore issuing an order to admit Dalit children to public schools (In 1913 Kerala saw one of its first organized farmer's strikes, with agricultural labourers (mostly Dalits) demanding fair treatment and wages. This marked the earliest organised assertion of labour rights by the oppressed castes. Guru was keenly aware of these social struggles and reacted through the power of his literature. He wrote potential works like 'Jātinirṇayam' and 'Jāti Mīmāṃs' (treatises on caste) and poems like 'Nirvrithi Panchakam' (Five Verses on Cessation).

These compositions directly engaged in the caste question, advocating for equality and universal brotherhood. In one oft-quoted verse, Guru challenged the orthodox view of determining caste birth-based, declaring: 'By acts alone the caste is known, not birth, nor race, nor blood, nor bone.' Such lines put forth a rational, ethical stance on social identity, reflecting the influence of modern reformist thought in his milieu.

1.3.2.2 Interaction with Global Events

Guru's poetry also subtly reflected global events of his time. Notably, the horrors of the First World War (1914–1918) influenced his emphasis on ahimsa (non-violence). The global atmosphere of violence and destruction during WWI underscored for Guru the importance of compassion and non-violence. His poem 'Ahimsa' can be read as a literary response to the brutality of war, presenting non-violence as both a personal virtue and a social necessity. This universal message aligned Guru with broader global peace movements and foreshadowed principles later championed by leaders like Mahatma Gandhi.

1.3.2.3 The Rise of Print Culture and Literary Modernity

The early 20th century witnessed the growth of print culture in Kerala, with new journals, newspapers, and literary magazines proliferating and influencing public life. Guru's works began to be disseminated through these print channel and greatly expanded his reach beyond traditional settings like temples or oral recitation. Malayalam literature was modernising, with writers adopting new themes and forms. Guru engaged with this literary modernity. He incorporated contemporary imagery and even foreign terms into his Malayalam verses. For instance, he used symbols of modern technology, steamships, railways, etc., to convey spiritual ideas. His metaphor of compairing God to a steamship, suggesting the Divine as a mighty vessel guiding souls across the ocean of life influenced philosephers and thinkers who populariserised the view in turn. He also referred the speed of trains as another metaphor for spiritual progress. These modern allusions show Guru's awareness of the changing world around him and his willingness to blend tradition with contemporary life.

1.3.2.4 Influence of Buddhism and Kumaran Asan

Guru's literary and philosophical milieu was also informed by a rich confluence of Advaita Vedanta, Buddhism, Tamil Siddha traditions, and regional bhakti movements. He drew upon classical Sanskrit thought while critically reinterpreting its tenets to align with his egalitarian vision. Unlike the orthodox Advaita of Shankara, which was often confined to metaphysical abstraction, Guru's Advaitic vision was rooted in social ethics and lived reality, this was expressed in works such as 'Atmopadeśa Śatakam' and Jātinirṇayam. His texts show an engagement with the Upaniṣads, Bhagavad Gita, and Tamil philosophical poetry, as well as Dravidian spiritual traditions.

The major cultural influence in Guru's milieu was the resurgence of the Buddhist thought which was centred on the ascetic values of detachment, compression and renunciation. These values were familiar to Guru as it was after the decline of Buddhism in the 15th century in Kerala, the caste- hierarchy based on Brahminical hegemony became powerful in the social structure, culminating in the transformation of Kerala in to the state of 'bedlam', in the expression of Swami Vivekananda. It is to be understood in this context that it was Vivekananda who later inspired Dr. Pulpu to find a spiritual leader to initiate reform movements and Dr. Pulpu's quest for such a leader eventually ended in Narayana Guru. Narayana Guru established the SNDP Yogam with Kumaran Asan as its founder Secretary. The works of Guru's disciple

Kumaran Asan who exerged as a leading Malayalam poet and social reformer also influenced Guru's perceptions to a certain extend which cannot be left unmentioned here.

Asan translated Sir Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* (A poetic biography of Buddha into Malayalam entitled 'Sreebuddha Charitham' in 1915, introducing Buddhist ideals to the contemporary readership. The fiusion of Buddhist ethics- compassion, renunciation, non-violence in Malayalam literature happened thereafter. Guru's own dialogue which was exchanged between the two, poem like 'Nirvrithi', 'Panchakam' and 'Ahimsa' emphasise compassion non-violence and universal brotherhood paralleling Buddhist teachings. Through the direct intellectual exchange between the great saint and his devoted disciple Asan, the perceptions of both the writers attained clarity of expresson in their works. Guru guided Asan as his disciple in spiritual and literary pursuits, resulted in the composition of many of Asan's renowned poems such as 'Veena Poovu' (The Fallen Flower) and 'Chandala Bhikshuki' (The outcaste beggar woman) which carry the impacts of Guru's philosophy critiquing caste and exemplifying compassion. They remain the true testimonies for a researcher to trace Guru's influence in Asan's poetic vision.

1.3.2.5 The 'Literary Triumvirate' and Guru's Distinct Position

In terms of language and style, Guru made a conscious break from elite literary forms. While proficient in Sanskrit, he chose to write many of his works in simple Malayalam, Tamil, and occasionally in Sanskritised Malayalam to ensure accessibility. His use of mantra-like verses, aphorisms, and didactic poetry combined spiritual insight with clarity and brevity. For instance, his "Daiva Dasakam" and 'Anukampa Dasakam' are profound devotional poems rendered in a language even children could learn and recite. His literary philosophy was guided by the belief that language should serve to address truth and liberation, not hierarchy and obscurity. In Malayalam literary history, Kumaran Asan, Vallathol Narayana Menon, and Ulloor S. Parameswara Iyer are often referred to as the 'great literary triumvirate' of the early 20th century.

While these three are celebrated purely as poets, Guru carved out a distinct position for himself side by side with them by virtue of his dual role as poet and saintly social reformer. Unlike his contemporaries whose focus was largely on literary pursuits or cultural themes, Guru treated poetry as an extension of his philosophical teachings and reformist activities. His verses were often didactic and aimed at social uplift, not just aesthetic expression. Contemporary writers admired Guru's works for their simplicity of language, spiritual depth, and transformative power. It is noted, for example, that Kumaran Asan's poem 'Chandala Bhikshuki' was directly inspired by Guru's message of egalitarianism. Yet Guru himself, rather than writing elaborate epics or romantic poetry, concentrated on concise philosophical poems and hymns that transcended literary embellishment. This gave his oeuvre a uniquely potent quality – more than literature, it was literature in service of truth and social change.

1.3.2.6 A Renaissance of Spirituality

Scholars have described Guru's poetic contribution as a 'renaissance of spirituality.' Unlike much traditional devotional poetry that often reinforced ritualism or caste distinctions, Guru's

devotional verses were radically universal and egalitarian. His hymns and prayers invite all of humanity to participate, with an emphasis on inner purity over external rites. For instance, Guru's short Malayalam prayer "Daiva Dasakam" (Ten Verses to God', composed c.1914) redefined devotion in simple terms. In these ten verses, the devotee surrenders to a singular, all-pervasive God without reference to any sectarian deity or caste-based privilege. Guru's call to worship one formless Divine accessible to everyone was revolutionary in Kerala's religious landscape at the time. It offered a unifying spiritual vision in place of the divisive temple rules that barred lower castes. Such works exemplify how Guru's milieu of social reform was intertwined with a spiritual reformation – a new Bhakti (devotional) movement that emphasised equality.

1.3.2.7 Guru as Rishi and Poet: The Aesthetics of Darśana

In his work *Kavijanakalpita Kāvyamī Darśanam*, Rajikumar T.R. states that Sree Narayana Guru was a ṛiṣhi (seer) who lived in modern times. A ṛiṣhi is one who gains divine vision (darśana) through austerity for the benefit of the world. When a rishi imparts this vision to disciples, he becomes a guru. Guru's vision, his experiential truth, was expressed through over sixty works. He is Guru because he dispelled darkness (ignorance) and brought in the light of knowledge: 'Guśabdham andhakāram tān Ruśabdham tannirōdhakam.' 'ഗുശബ്ദം അന്ധകാരം താൻ രുശബ്ദം തന്നിരോധകം' (Gu'-stands for darkness and 'ru' for dispelling it – in the sense darkness is ignourance and light knowledge).

The central theme of Guru's writings is Advaita Vedānta. His intent was to immerse followers in the radiance of wisdom and dispel their blindness. These writings are also, from the lens of poetics, aesthetically complete. The aim of this study is to perceive the beauty with which this darśana is rendered. When the inner visions of a seer are shaped by spontaneous creative power, they become supreme poetry. The Vedas, Itihāsas, and Upaniṣads are examples. In the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, two birds on a fig tree, one eating, one watching, are metaphors for the jñānī (knower) and ajñānī (ignorant). The Chāndogya Upaniṣad presents the subtle power of a seed that contains within it the vast arāyaḷa tree. These are poetic in the highest sense. Kena Upaniṣad presents Umā Haimavatī in a dramatic way. In the Rāmāyaṇa, the sorrow (śoka) that arises in the heart of the sage Valmiki upon seeing a hunter kill a bird is the origin of the śloka (poetry). Narada interprets this as the divine indication to narrate the Rāma story, thus Valmiki becomes the ādikavi (first poet) and first sahṛdaya (empathic reader).

The Vedas, Upaniṣads, and Itihāsas are spiritual expressions shaped through the rishis' language. Their spiritual beauty is infused with poetic beauty. 'Sree Narayana Guru' did not write literature with literary intention. Literature was a vehicle for him to express his vision of truth. Had he tried to imitate the neoclassicism or romanticism prevalent then, he might have become unmatched in literary greatness in Malayalam. As the saying goes, 'A poet and a rishi are not separate.'

In understanding Guru as a poet, we ultimately encounter Guru the seer. 'Nā ṛṣiḥ kavirityukta– Ṛṣiśca kila darśanāt Darśanāt varṇanāt vāpi Rūḍhā loke kaviśrutiḥ Vicitra bhāvadharmāṁśa tattva prakhyā ca darśanam' (Bhaṭṭatauta, Kāvyakautukam) 'ന ഋഷിഃ കവിരിത്യുക്ത

ഷിശ്ച കില ദർശനാത് ദർശനാത് വർണ്ണാത് വാപി രൂഢാ ലോകേ കവിശ്രുതിഃ വിചിത്ര ഭാവധർമ്മംശാ തത്ത്വ പ്രഖ്യാ ച ദർശനം' (ഭട്ടതൗത, കാവ്യകൗതുകം) A non-rishi cannot be a poet. The one who has darśana becomes a seer. The poet is one who reveals truths (tattva) behind the varied emotions and principles (bhāva and dharma). True poetry is the expression of this vision through nuanced expression and depiction. Guru, thus, was not writing to ornament language or evoke romance. His poetry carries the weight of an inward journey.

1.3.2.8 Spreading Guru's Words: Journals and Public Platforms

The rise of Malayalam-language periodicals during Guru's time greatly amplified his literary impact. Many of Guru's poems and essays were published in prominent journals, reaching audiences far beyond his immediate locality. For example, in 1904 Kumaran Asan started the journal 'Vivekodayam', and later the SNDP Yogam published Sree Narayana Dharmam; both magazines regularly featured Guru's compositions. Poems like "Daiva Dasakam" (his universal prayer) and 'Jātinirṇayam' (Determination of Caste) were printed and circulated widely. This allowed Guru's message to penetrate not only among the educated elite but also among common people, as these writings were often read aloud at gatherings and meetings. Public recitations and bhajan gatherings were another platform.

Devotional songs composed by Guru were sung in community prayer halls (such as those established by SNDP Yogam), carrying his words into the collective conscience of the people. In short, the emerging print culture and public forums of the early 20th century enabled Guru's literary reach to expand exponentially, firmly establishing him as a 'people's poet' and spiritual guide.

1.3.2.9 Intellectual Exchanges and Debates

Guru's milieu was also enriched by intellectual exchanges across different traditions. He engaged in discussions with Sanskrit scholars and pundits, which helped him when he composed works like 'Darśanamālā' (a garland of philosophical tenets in Sanskrit). He also interacted with Tamil scholars and was himself an admirer of the Tamil classic 'Thirukkural,' which he translated into Malayalam. Furthermore, he wrote a Malayalam commentary on the Vedantic text 'Vivekachudamani' by Adi Shankaracharya. These endeavors show Guru conversing with pan-Indian philosophical literature. Such dialogues sharpened Guru's literary and philosophical output. By translating and interpreting texts from Sanskrit and Tamil, he built bridges between Kerala's vernacular literary culture and the broader Indian knowledge systems. This cross-pollination of ideas – between modern Malayalam, classical Sanskrit, vernacular Tamil, and even English (which he picked up from conversations with followers) – exemplifies how Guru's literary milieu was truly cosmopolitan.

1.3.3 Thematic and Stylistic Trends Shaped by the Milieu

Sree Narayana Guru's poetry reflects the major themes and stylistic trends of his vibrant socio-political environment. The Kerala Renaissance influenced not just what he wrote about, but also how he wrote – his imagery, language, and poetic techniques.

1.3.3.1 Themes Inspired by Social Realities

Guru's poetry was deeply shaped by the social issues of his time. Central among these was the problem of caste and social inequality. Many of his major works continually return to the theme of a universal moral law that transcends man-made divisions. Caste discrimination is directly addressed in pieces like 'Jātinirṇayam' and 'Jāti Mīmāṃs.' Guru forcefully challenged the orthodox notion that caste is divinely ordained or based on birth. Instead, he argued for a humanistic and rational measure of a person's worth.

As cited earlier, Guru wrote that one's actions (not birth or lineage) determine one's true quality. Other recurring social themes include the folly of religious sectarianism and the need for education and enlightenment to dispel ignorance. These themes mirror the reformist thought prevalent in Kerala during his life. In essence, Guru's milieu of social reform, marked by movements against untouchability and for universal education, found poetic expression in his verses that advocate social equality, knowledge, and compassion.

1.3.3.2 Spiritual Philosophy: Vedanta and Buddhism

Philosophically, Guru was influenced by Advaita Vedanta (the non-dualism of Adi Shankara) and by Buddhist teachings. In the late 19th century, there was a resurgence of interest in Vedantic thought in India, and Kerala too saw a revival of its study. Simultaneously, through works like The Light of Asia and writings of reformers, the ethical teachings of Buddha gained attention. Both these streams shaped Guru's poetic philosophy. Guru's mystical poetry – notably 'Atmopadesa Śatakam' (One Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction, written in Malayalam) and 'Darśanamālā' (written in Sanskrit) – analyses the Advaitic concepts of the one supreme reality and the illusion of multiplicity (maya). He presents complex ideas like non-duality (advaita) and self-realisation in simple imagery. For example, he uses the classic metaphor of the ocean and the wave to illustrate the relationship between the Absolute and the individual soul: 'The wave rises, but it is water, It falls, yet remains water.' In these lines, the wave (individual) and water (the underlying reality) are one substance. This imagery, accessible to any reader, captures the essence of Vedanta – that all apparent differences are superficial, and the underlying truth is unity. At the same time, such verses resonate with the Buddhist notion of impermanence and the non-separateness of beings. The seamless blending of Vedantic and Buddhist thought in Guru's poetry reflects the spiritual synthesis of his milieu.

1.3.3.3 Stylistic Simplicity and Accessibility

One of the hallmarks of Guru's poetic style is simplicity of language, which was very much a deliberate choice influenced by the Renaissance ethos. The reformers of Kerala encouraged writing in Malayalam that could be understood by ordinary people (as opposed to the highly Sanskritised verses of earlier eras). Guru adopted this accessible style to reach a wider audience.

Gur'us poems, though philosophically profound, use plain diction and lucid syntax so that even a common villager could grasp the basic message. He avoided overly scholastic or obscure Sanskrit compounds. Instead, he sometimes blended Malayalam with Sanskrit and Tamil, or

even inserted a modern English term, if it made the point clearer. For instance, in campaigning against alcoholism (a social ill he decried), Guru composed a simple Malayalam couplet: 'മദ്യം വിഷമാണ്; അത് ഉണ്ടാക്കരുത്; കൊടുക്കരുത്; കുടിക്കരുത്' (Liquor is poison; do not manufacture it, do not give it, do not drink it). This straightforward, rhythmic injunction was easily memoriserised and often recited in temperance campaigns. Such clarity and directness made his teachings accessible to all, fulfilling his aim of mass awakening.

1.3.3.4 Ethical and Rational Tone

A defining feature of Guru's poetic style is its didactic (teaching) tone – he often sounds like a teacher or philosopher guiding the reader. This comes from his firm grounding in ethics and reason, likely shaped by the Renaissance ideals of rationality and the emerging scientific temper. Many of his verses read like aphorisms or concise maxims that convey a moral principle. For example: 'No one would like violence against themselves; Hence, dharma (righteous conduct) should be universal.' In these lines, Guru uses simple logic (the Golden Rule) to advocate non-violence as a universal duty. Such an appeal to reason and shared human values is characteristic of the age of social reform. His poetry, therefore, often transcends mysticism to engage the rational mind of the reader. This ethical clarity made his verses effective tools for social change, reinforcing Guru's dual role as poet and reformer.

1.3.4 Guru's Literary Milieu

Sree Narayana Guru's literary milieu – the vibrant socio-political and cultural context of Kerala's Renaissance – profoundly shaped his poetry and its enduring impact. Guru not only reflected his times in his writings but also actively reshaped those times through his literary contributions, spiritual insights, and reformist zeal.

1.3.4.1 Poetry as a Vehicle for Social and Spiritual Revolution

Guru's poetry, deeply rooted in his milieu, became a powerful instrument for both social change and spiritual awakening. Unlike many contemporaries who focused on literary aesthetics or cultural revival alone, Guru consciously wielded poetry to challenge social injustices (especially caste discrimination) and to impart spiritual wisdom. His verses functioned as reformist slogans and prayers alike. For instance, one of his couplets – 'One Caste, One Religion, One God for Man' (One in kind, one in faith, one in God is man)– transcended the pages of his notebook to become an iconic motto emblazoned on banners and repeated in public meetings. It succinctly captured the core of his revolutionary message and was soon on the lips of every progressive enthusiast in Kerala. Such is the unique legacy of Guru's milieu: poetic lines became rallying cries. Literature and action went hand-in-hand. In reform movements (like the temple-entry agitations in the 1920s–30s), Guru's words provided inspiration and guidance, demonstrating how poetry can move societies toward greater justice.

1.3.4.2 Influence on Contemporary and Successive Literary Figures

Guru's literary milieu was enriched by the presence of contemporary thinkers and social reformers, both within and outside Kerala. Figures such as Chattampi Swamikal, Ayyankali, and Kumaran Asan were part of a larger cultural renaissance that sought to challenge casteism and

colonial domination through education, literature, and activism. While Asan was a direct disciple of Guru and shaped by his ethical-spiritual teachings, other reformers formed a parallel tradition of critical, liberatory literature. Guru's position was unique in the sense, he was not just a poet or reformer but also a living philosopher whose own life embodied the values he expressed in writing.

Guru's engagement with contemporaries like Kumaran Asan, Vallathol, and Ulloor helped him foster a literary culture in which poetry was not just 'art for art's sake' but an instrument of ethical reflection. Through Asan (his disciple), many of Guru's themes entered the mainstream of Malayalam poetry. Later writers and poets, too, took inspiration from Guru. For example, poets of the next generation such as G. Sankara Kurup and Kumaranelloor (Bodhananda) were influenced by Guru's fusion of the spiritual and the social. Even decades later, the great Malayalam poet Vyloppilli Sreedhara Menon proceeded to write poems echoing Guru's humanism. In essence, Guru carved a path that blurred the line between the saint and the poet – a model that influenced literary figures to infuse their works with philosophical depth and social concern. Reformers outside the literary sphere, like Sahodaran Ayyappan and Dr. Palpu, found on Guru's writings an intellectual fuel. This created a synergy between literature and activism. Guru's milieu thus showed its influence on the subsequent generations of Kerala's intellectuals that literature and social progress were intertwined.

1.3.4.3 Impact on Kerala's Social Reform and Literary Traditions

The unique blend of spiritual, philosophical, and social themes in Guru's poetry laid the groundwork for many progressive currents in Kerala's culture. His works still continue to inspire the Dalit writers and social justice activists. They often cite Guru as a pioneer who legitimised the critique of caste in the literary form, paving the way for Dalit literature in Malayalam emerge in later decades.Contemporary Malayalam poetry frequently revisits ethical and humanistic themes that Guru emphasised, such as the oneness of humanity and compassion for the downtrodden.

Interfaith dialogue and unity – a theme of Guru's life and poems – remain highly relevant in Kerala's pluralistic society. His vision of seeing the same Divine in all religions is invoked the promotion of communal harmony even today. In many Kerala schools, prayers like 'Daiva Dasakam' are recited daily by students who belong to all religions, showing how his literary legacy has been woven into the social fabric. Culturally, Kerala commemorates the anniversaries of Guru's birth and samadhi (passing away) as state holidays, reflecting the deep reverence to his contributions.

1.3.4.4 Universal Relevance of Guru's Literary Vision

Sree Narayana Guru's writings profoundly impacted Kerala, extending far beyond his lifetime and establishing the moral and intellectual bedrock for the state's modernity. His unwavering emphasis on education, ethical living, and unity transcending caste and religion profoundly influenced generations of writers, social thinkers, and political activists. When Indian President Dr. Zakir Hussain inaugurated the Samadhi Mandiram in Sivagiri, consecrated with Guru's marble statue, Kerala's first Chief Minister, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, powerfully observed in his presidential

address: "Guru managed to plough the Kerala soil during his times and made it fertile for the seeds of communist ideology to grow and flourish in the successive years." Furthermore, Guru played a pivotal role in democratizing Malayalam literary culture, previously the exclusive preserve of a privileged few.

Today, Guru's works are studied not merely as spiritual texts but as transformative literary interventions that redefined the very boundaries of Malayalam literature and social thought. Though rooted in the specifics of his era and region, Guru's literary vision possesses a universal quality that transcends Kerala and India. His emphasis on non-violence, compassion, rationality, and spiritual equality resonates far beyond his immediate context. These ideals align closely with later global movements and philosophies: Gandhian non-violence (satya and ahimsa), the Buddhist revival and mindfulness practices worldwide, and even modern human rights discourses that uphold equality and dignity for all. Poems like 'Ahimsa' or 'Nirvrithi Panchakam' are not just relics of early 1900s in Kerala – their messages speak to any society grappling with violence or division. This timeless quality is why Guru's works have been translated into multiple languages and studied internationally.

Scholars compare Guru with great spiritual poets like Rumi and philosopher-poets like Tagore. His writings are discussed in global forums on peace and spirituality, securing his place among the world's moral poets.

In summary, the milieu that shaped Guru gave rise to poetry that now belongs to the world, carrying forward the light of unity, love, and wisdom. Sree Narayana Guru lived during the Kerala Renaissance and made poetry a medium of social reform. His works reflected the social realities of his time – responding to caste injustices and drawing inspiration from contemporaries like Ayyankali and his struggles. Global events such as the First World War influenced his emphasis on non-violence (e.g., the poem 'Ahimsa). The introduction of Buddhist themes by Kumaran Asan (through his 1915 translation of The Light of Asia) resonated in Guru's compassionate vision. The rise of print culture in early 20th -century Kerala greatly expanded Guru's reach, with journals publishing poems like "Daiva Dasakam" and 'Jātinirṇayam.' Guru's poetry addressed both personal spiritual awakening and pressing social issues. He interacted with literary figures like Vallathol and Ulloor, and mentored Kumaran Asan directly. Reformers such as Dr. Palpu and Sahodaran Ayyappan were inspired by Guru's words.

His famous slogan 'One Caste, One Religion, One God for Man' (One in kind, one in faith, one in God is man) encapsulated his message and became iconic. In style, Guru's poetry combined reformist zeal with mystical insight – reflecting simplicity of language, modern imagery (like railways), and deep philosophy in equal measure. Guru's poetry was shaped by a vibrant reformist and spiritual milieu. His poetic vision was not ornamental, but a reflection of inner realisation (darśana). Guru employed rich metaphors like ocean, sun, and seed to convey Advaitic truths. He was both a rishi and a poet, his verses were channels of spiritual illumination. The 'Ātmōpadeśa Śatakam'stands as a journey from self-perception to cosmic unity. Guru's poetic art merged kāvyānanda (aesthetic joy) with brahmānanda (divine bliss).

Recap

- Sree Narayana Guru's active years (1856-1928) coincided with Kerala's social-reform ferment.
- The term "literary milieu" captures the cultural, social and political atmosphere shaping Guru's work.
- Guru wrote amid the Kerala Renaissance, when print technology amplified reformist voices.
- Colonial modernity introduced new education and journalism that opened public debate on caste.
- Guru's Aruvippuram consecration (1888) sparked spiritual democracy and challenged Brahmin hegemony.
- His poetry conversed with contemporaries like Kumaran Asan, Vallathol and Ulloor.
- Guru's emphasis on ahimsa resonated globally during the First World War era.
- Print journals such as 'Vivekodayam' serialised Guru's verses and essays.
- Kumaran Asan publicly acknowledged Guru as his philosophical mentor.
- Ayyankali's agrarian protests paralleled Guru's poetic critique of caste oppression.
- Renaissance writers fused bhakti with social critique, creating modern Malayalam idioms.
- Guru deployed classical symbols (Gaṅgā, Śiva) to universalise local reform messages.
- He balanced advaitic mysticism with practical social ethics in his poems.
- Guru's literary Ganges metaphor frames poetry as a life-giving river to society.
- The milieu featured missionary education, which widened literacy and readership.
- Women's education campaigns found support in Guru's egalitarian teachings.
- Newspapers criticised caste hierarchies, creating fertile ground for Guru's ideas.

- Guru's interactions with Christian and Muslim reformers reflect inter-faith dialogue.
- Industrialisation and migration altered Kerala's economy, mirrored in poetic references.
- Guru's disciples established press facilities to disseminate his works cheaply.
- Renaissance salons hosted readings where Guru's verses stirred audiences.
- Guru's language choices blended Sanskritised Malayalam with common speech for accessibility.
- His poetic calls for unity, "oru jāti, oru matam", became rallying cries.
- Caste reform movements influenced later political parties and cultural organisations.
- Guru's milieu shows literature functioning as both spiritual scripture and social manifesto.

Objective Questions

1. Kerala Renaissance century turn?
2. Dalit leader linked to school protest?
3. Text Asan translated from Arnold?
4. Guru's anti-violence poem title?
5. 1914-18 global conflict shaping ethos?
6. What is trio of poets called ?
7. What did the printing boom boost in Guru's poetry?
8. Main caste system target of Guru?
9. What does the steamship metaphor depict?
10. What were opened after the 1936 proclamation?

Answers

1. Twentieth
2. Ayyankali
3. LightofAsia
4. Ahimsa
5. WWI
6. Triumvirate
7. Reach
8. Untouchability
9. God
10. Temples

Assignments

1. Examine intersections between Guru's poetry and Ayyankali's activism.
2. How did print culture amplify reform messages in Guru's circle?
3. Discuss WWI's indirect influence on Ahimsa.
4. Compare Buddhist resonances in Guru and Kumaran Asan.
5. Analyse Guru's marine imagery as socio-spiritual symbol.

SGOU

BLOCK - 1

UNIT

Critical Acclaim and Legacy

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- trace critical reception of Guru's poetry from 1900 to today
- identify aesthetic qualities lauded by reviewers
- discuss the role of translation's in globalising his work
- evaluate Guru's influence on later anti-caste and spiritual writing

Prerequisites

In his book, *Sreenarayanaguru Kavithakaliloode*, Dr. K. Sugathan writes that people viewed Sree Narayana Guru much like the blind men who attempted to describe an elephant, each interpreting him from their limited perspective. To some, he was a Hindu ascetic (Hindu sanyāsi), a devout poet who composed hymns praising deities like Śiva, Viṣṇu, Murukan, Saraswati, and Kāli. To others, he appeared as a leader of the Ezhava community. Some saw him as a social reformer who tried to elevate an entire section of the population condemned to live as slaves. Eventually, scholars began to perceive him as a Vedantin who fully embraced the philosophy of Advaita (non-dualism). Yet, in the early years, hardly anyone thought of introducing Guru as a poet. Ironically, it is through his poems that many now try to understand him.

After visiting Sree Narayana Guruswami, Rabindranath Tagore wrote in English about the spiritual encounter. It would read approximately as follows: 'I have travelled across many parts of the world. During these travels, I was fortunate to meet several ascetics and sages. But I can declare without doubt that I have never met a person more spiritually advanced than Narayana Guruswami of Malayalam. That face, radiant with divine brilliance, glowing with an inner light, and those yogic eyes fixed upon a point in the distant infinite, I shall never forget them.' Sree Narayana Guru's poetry has received immense critical acclaim for its depth, simplicity, and universality.

Key themes

Reception, Translation, Aesthetics, Dalit-studies, Universality, Metre, Legacy

Discussion

1.4.1 Introduction

Literary scholars, social reformers, and spiritual leaders alike have praised Guru's poetic works as masterpieces that transcend temporal and cultural boundaries. In Guru's verses, philosophical wisdom, social critique, and aesthetic beauty come together seamlessly. This unique blend earned admiration from both his contemporaries and modern critics. Guru was a poet-philosopher who did not fit the conventional mould of a 'literary' poet, yet the literary merit of his works is indisputable. The sincerity and clarity of his language, the musical quality of his metre, and the profundity of his ideas garnered respect from learned circles. At the same time, the tangible impact of his words on society (inspiring reforms and guiding masses) earned him a saintly stature. In this unit, we survey how Guru's poetry was received in his lifetime and the recognition it attained on broader stages.

1.4.2 Contemporary Reception and National Recognition

During his lifetime, Sree Narayana Guru's poetry and teachings attracted significant attention and admiration from those around him, including fellow writers, social reformers, and even figures of national prominence. The value of his literary contributions was acknowledged not just for their poetic beauty, but for their transformative impact on society.

1.4.2.1 Guru's Poetic Vision Beyond Aesthetics

In his work Sreenarayanaguru: Kavithayum Soundaryashastravum, Dr. Manoj Kurur states that the aesthetics of Guru's works cannot be separated from his philosophy. However, unlike the rigorous explorations into his philosophical and reformist ideas, a few studies have been conducted into the aesthetics of his literary works. Scholars such as Prof.

G. Balakrishnan Nair, T. Bhaskaran, Sukumar Azhikode, M.K. Sanu and Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri have linked Guru's poetry to his worldview and life philosophy. There have also been academic research studies by scholars including K. Shobhan. Nevertheless, much more analytical work in this field is still necessary.

There is no need to separately state that Sree Narayana Guru was both a philosopher and a social reformer. That is how his life and writings have largely been evaluated. It is crucial to assert in this contex that he was a poet, not incidentally, but intrinsically. His works reflect the vision of a poet, who, unlike systematic philosophers who build arguments from texts and premises, arrives at truth intuitively and naturally through personal experience. This convergence of method is clear in his poetic lines: കവിസന്തതി സന്തതവും തൊഴുമെൻ-ഭവനാടകമാടു മരുമ്പൊരുളേ!' (Śivaprasāda Pañcakam) (ശിവപ്രസാദപഞ്ചകം) These lines show the lofty status he accords to poets. He describes the poet as a visionary capable of witnessing the Śiva-nṛtya (cosmic dance of Shiva) in the theatre of the universe and grasping its inner meaning. In that sense, if the title 'poet' (kavi) does not fit anyone else, it certainly fits Sree Narayana Guru. However, most interpretations of Guru's works have focused more on philosophical rather than aesthetic dimensions. The interpreters were mostly rooted in spiritual traditions, and literary critics have long shown a certain indifference to the aesthetic qualities of his poetry.

Guru was a poet who understood the centrality of authentic personal experience in poetry. When forty verses from his 'Svānubhava Gītī' (Song of Personal Experience), written in 1894, were lost, Karuva Krishnanasan requested Guru to reproduce them. Guru replied, 'The one who wrote those verses is no longer here; it would not be proper for someone else to complete them.' This response has been recorded by interpreters of his works. (Sreenarayanaguru: Kavithayum Soundaryashastravum – Dr. Manoj Kurur) In his work *Vaakkum Vakthavum: Sreenarayana Rachanakalile Kaavyaanubhavam*, Udayakumar writes that the writings of Sree Narayana Guru are not representative examples of the poetic culture of his time. If they had conformed to the dominant literary patterns, they might have secured a clear place in the canon of Malayalam literary history. In the familiar narratives of our poetic tradition, Guru's name seldom appears. But among the works composed during his era, few exhibit the interpretative richness found in Guru's compositions. The disjunction between his writings and today's poetic culture resists linear, conventional historiographical interpretations.

1.4.3 Academic and Literary Criticism Over the Decades

In the decades following Guru's lifetime, his poetry continued to be a subject of rigorous analysis and discussion in academic and literary circles. Scholars from various disciplines – literature, philosophy, history, and sociology – have examined his works for their artistic brilliance, philosophical depth, and social significance.

1.4.3.1 Philosophical Interpretations

Philosophers and religious scholars have lauded Guru's poetry for its profound engagement with Advaita Vedanta and other spiritual traditions. Works like 'Atmopadeśa Śatakam' and 'Darśanamālā' are often studied as much for their philosophical content as for their literary value. Academics point

out that Guru offered a simplified yet authentic expression of complex concepts such as non-duality (the oneness of the individual soul with the Universal Self), self-realisation, and the illusory nature of worldly distinctions. For example, the metaphor of the wave and water (discussed earlier) is frequently cited in philosophy classes as an elegant illustration of the Vedantic principle 'Brahman alone is real, the world is an appearance.'

Guru's ability to explain intricate Advaitic ideas using relatable everyday images has been praised for its pedagogical brilliance. It makes lofty concepts graspable to ordinary people – a feat that not many philosophers achieve. As a result, his writings find place in comparative religion and philosophy curricula. Scholars sometimes compare his verses to the Upaniṣads in terms of clarity. The continued citation of lines like 'The wave rises, but it is water…' in academic papers shows the high esteem in which Guru's philosophical poetry is held.

1.4.3.2 Literary Appreciation of Style and Craft

Literary critics have consistently highlighted Guru's craftsmanship in poetry. As noted by Dr. T. Bhaskaran and others, Guru's deliberate choice of metres and careful diction demonstrate a deep understanding of sound aesthetics. Modern literary analysis often points out how Guru balanced sound and sense, which is a hallmark of great poetry. Critics also discuss Guru's imaginative use of metaphor and symbolism. For instance, the image of 'the lamp with five wicks' in one of his verses is ana'lysed as representing the five senses or the five elements, showing how Guru packed layers of meaning into a simple image. His frequent use of oceanic imagery (sea, waves, shore) is noted to give his poems a meditative, expansive quality. The ocean metaphor recurs as a symbol of the infinite or the universal, and critics admire how consistently and effectively he employed this symbol.

Guru's language – straightforward and unadorned – is another point of discussion. In an age when many poets still indulged in flowery language, Guru's pared-down style is seen as an innovation that prefigured later modernist simplicity in Malayalam poetry. Thus, literary historians credit him with being ahead of his time stylistically. The path that Sree Narayana Guru adopted to communicate his ideas to society was poetry. His entry into the world of verse occurred in the final decades of the nineteenth century, a time aptly described as the twilight of a dark era. Guru's entry into the poetic realm was marked by a conscious departure from the dominant Sanskritic tradition. Apart from Pūnthānam, whose poetic method was already distinct, no one else of that era dared to embrace a more accessible style. It was also a time when the simplification of language was met with resistance.

At a period when Sanskrit-derived diction held a tight grip on poetic expression, Guru crafted a poetic universe in a language markedly different,simple yet deeply resonant. It is into this poetic world of Guru that poet and thinker Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri ventures. Though Kumāran Āśān, Guru's disciple, created many great poems, the author affirms that Sree Narayana Guru was an even greater poet. Guru, the spiritual master, employed poetry to guide his followers toward the blossoms of renaissance and the steps of spirituality. Deliberately avoiding Sanskrit vocabulary, Guru wrote poems that evoked local customs and dialects, generating both contemplation and poetic beauty.

Guru's works became a foundational contribution to the history of Malayalam poetry. For his disciples and followers, many of whom grew in awareness simply through proximity, Guru's works were a blessing. By moving away from the display of scholarship and towards the peak of knowledge with accessible simplicity, Guru became a people's poet. His lyrical compositions flowed with agile rhythms and compact metres. Drawing from the richness of folk traditions, he reimagined and refined these forms into powerful melodies.

Works like 'Kuṇḍalinīpāṭṭu', 'Kāḷināṭakam', 'Ātmopadeśa Śatakam', and 'Daivadaśakam'remain luminous in Malayali culture even today. As a dynamic builder of a new social order, Nārāyaṇa Guru holds a prominent place in our lineage of poets. He was a legislator, Tantric practitioner, wandering ascetic, and prophet, a personality held in lasting regard across all these roles. Yet, as Namboothiri notes, Guru's poetic world has not been studied with the seriousness it deserves. The recognition that Guru is the path-breaker of Malayalam poetry is still lacking. We have had many devotional poets since Rāmacaritam, but they were not ascetics. And though Kerala has known many ascetics, they were rarely poets. Guru was a unique confluence of both. The austerities of a seeker of liberation and the creative pursuits of a poet rarely converge. Only three Malayalees possessed this rare quality: Ādi Śaṅkara, Nārāyaṇa Guru, and Himavad Vibhūti Tapovana Svāmikal. Among these, as Namboothiri highlights, only Sree Narayana Guru worshipped through the medium of Malayalam-language poetry. Guru, a philosopher-poet of original vision, moved on his poetic journey without any prior model. Thus, he had to overcome many constraints unknown to conventional poets. For those rooted in worldly life, the moment of expression brings several points where poetic metre (pathya) and pattern (yativarya) may need to be consciously abandoned.

Without forgetting the ephemeral nature of worldly truth, the poet must raise fleeting beauty toward the eternal. He must shape the rhythms, images, and imaginative constructions into vessels of transcendence. It is difficult even to imagine the internal anguish Guru must have endured to articulate the mystical experiences of his soul while composing 'Kuṇḍalinīpāṭṭu' and 'Kāḷināṭakam'. His early works, 'Śivaśatakam' and 'Mānanātītam', express a yearning to transcend the demands of the flesh. 'Śivaśatakam' vividly portrays bodily decay. In one instance, Guru even unleashes scathing criticism of Śiva, penning Ardha Nāreeshvara Stavam in frustration over a prolonged drought in a particular region. For the first time in Malayalam literary history, an ascetic set out to compose poetry. When a taponiṣṭhan (one established in austerity) takes up poetry, certain principles must be observed: Avoidance of erotic themes (śṛṅgāra); Maintenance of austerity; Embrace of love (sneha); Recognition of the world's transience, while transforming its beauty into a stepping stone toward the eternal; Composition must be experienceable.

ഒരു ജാതി ഒരു മതം ഒരു ദൈവം മനുഷ്യന്
"അവനവനാത്മസുഖത്തിനാചാരിക്കു-
ന്നവയപരന്നു സുഖത്തിനായി വരേണം."
"പലമതസാരവുമേകം
"ഒരു പീഡയെറുമ്പിനും വരുത്തരുത്"

These ideas reflect a rare linguistic precision (padārjavam). Guru's poetry is filled with an extraordinary internal gravity and verbal economy. The vedakavi, seer-poets who realised the Brahman-truth of even a worm, moth, or

ant in a flash, found poetic expression in everything: a flower, a river, a woman, the sky, the soul, and even a spinning stone. Works like Vedāntasūtram, Homa Mantram, Darśanamāla, Jātinirṇayam, and Nirvṛti Pañcakam demonstrate Guru's full command of Vedic language. His vāṅgmayam was a confluence of Vedic essence and Śaiva Siddhānta. Namboothiri asserts that Guru's poetry bears no difference from that of the vedic seer-poets. His compositions show astonishing craftsmanship (śilpa-bhadratā).

Before modern aesthetics even took shape, Kuṇḍalinīpāṭṭu had already surpassed them with its sculptural brilliance. The dancing snake and its performer bring to life both the universe and the divine. Subsequently, the senses and the mind are explored, finally culminating in the still inner witness, becoming the very pāmpāṭṭi (snake-charmer) of consciousness itself.

> 'One in kind, one in faith, one in God is man'
> Acts that one performs for one's own sake
> Should also aim for the good of other men!
> The maning of all faith is one's Do not cause suffering even to the slightest out?

Not even Kumāran Āśān could achieve such poetic structure. While Āśān composed first-rate poems, Guru was a first-rate poet. His 'Ātmopadeśa Śatakam' belongs to a unique metrical category untouched by others. Works such as Anukampādaśakam, Jananī Navaratna Mañjarī, Jīvakāruṇya Pañcakam, Kōlattīreśa Stavam, Maṇṇantala Devī Stavam, Guhāṣṭakam, and Kāḷināṭakam reflect a diverse rhythmic universe later emulated by Āśān. It is not only the modernity of Guru's poetic form that is striking. "The deserted paths of speech become strange; they suddenly attract." Otherwise, how would a line like "mañjīraśiñjitaṁ," known from Chañgampuzha's oft-quoted and later clichéd verse, appear in Guru's early composition Vāsudevāṣṭakam?

> Oh, God your feet is like
> A pearl lotus flowr
> Which emanates sweet fingling sands
> From the anklets studded
> With precious stone
>
> മഞ്ജീരമഞ്ജുമണിശിഞ്ജിതപാദപത്മ
> കഞ്ജായതാക്ഷ, കരുണാകര, കഞ്ജനാഭ
> സഞ്ജീവനൗഷധ സുധാമയ സാധുരമ്യ
> ശ്രീഭൂപതേ ഹര ഹരേ സകലാമയം മേ.

The formal beauty (rūpabhaṅgi) of Nārāyaṇa Guru's poetry deserves dedicated scholarly attention. The aesthetics of his compositions reflect on multiple levels, form, emotion, and experience, not separately, but as an interwoven whole. Yet, when it comes to Guru's philosophy, this integration is not merely intertwined but unified. Each word, each line, each stanza of his writings carries us into a realm of fresh inner experience.

In Uzhavukaranaya Kavi, Kavitha Raman explores the deep connection between the reader (sahṛdaya) and literature, with a focus on the writings of Narayana Guru. She argues that a true sahṛdaya is someone who deeply resonates with a literary work, shaped by their cultural background and interests. This response is guided by the five kośas (sheaths) of the human body: annamaya (physical), prāṇamaya (vital), manomaya (mental), vijñānamaya (intellectual), and ānandamaya (blissful). A person's dominant kośa influences their literary tastes. Those aligned with the annamaya kośa prefer stories about basic needs like food and sleep. Those drawn to the manomaya kośa favour emotionally and psychologically rich literature.

The prāṇamaya kośa connects with

energetic, life-force themes, while the vijñānamaya kośa relates to intellectual and philosophical texts. The ānandamaya kośa, representing spiritual bliss, aligns with transcendent, insightful literature. Raman applies this model to epics, assigning characters dominant kośas. In the Mahābhārata, the Kauravas represent the annamaya kośa, pursuing material goals, while the Pāṇḍavas embody the manomaya kośa, wrestling with emotions and ethics. Arjuna's battlefield dilemma reflects a shift to the prāṇamaya kośa. Vidura operates from the vijñānamaya kośa, offering wisdom. Krishna represents the ānandamaya kośa, symbolising spiritual joy. In the Rāmāyaṇa, Hanuman is tied to the prāṇamaya kośa, with his devotion and vigor. Raman questions who truly connects with Guru's works. She suggests those centered on the annamaya kośa may not resonate with his teachings. Those in the manomaya kośa may find emotional and mental cleansing through repeated reading. As this process progresses, the prāṇamaya is calmed, the vijñānamaya awakened, and deeper appreciation develops. Ultimately, those rooted in the ānandamaya kośa, spiritual seekers, are the true sahr̥dayas of Guru's literature. One anecdote highlights this: Bhārgavan, a young disciple, wanted to attend the royal āṟāṭṭu procession and decided to sell Guru's 'Ātmopadeśa Śatakam'.

Despite his efforts, 'Ātmopadeśa Śatakam' failed to attract buyers, unlike popular songs. Guru responded, "That is for the jijñāsus (seekers of knowledge)." Raman stresses that Guru's literature is not meant for the masses or any one community. It speaks to those who distinguish the eternal from the fleeting, who activate the vijñānamaya kośa, and seek brahmānanda (spiritual bliss). True rasa comes from this experience, marking spiritual aspirants as genuine sahr̥dayas. Ramana Maharshi reportedly affirmed the greatness of 'Ātmopadeśa Śatakam'. Guru's works guide the reader from inquiry (jijñāsā) to self-realisation. His poetry encapsulates the essence of the self (ātmasāra) and offers bliss (ānanda) through words. This bliss can only be accessed with insight and understanding. The rasa here is ultimate consciousness, as in 'raso vai saḥ' (He is indeed rasa). Only a paramahaṃsa, a realised soul, can fully absorb Guru's essence. Interpretations reflect the reader's mental and intellectual state. Guru's words are dialogic, enabling deep understanding. Exploring his teachings involves recognising the self as the source of all experience, unveiling spiritual bliss through literary engagement.

1.4.3.3 Social and Ethical Readings

Beyond form and philosophy, scholars in social sciences have studied Guru's poetry for its social messages. His critique of caste and advocacy of universal brotherhood have been the subject of research in sociology and history. Essays have been written on how Guru's poems provided an intellectual foundation for Kerala's anti-caste movements and the reformist ethos that led to historic changes like the Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936 (which opened Hindu temples to all castes). For example, verses from 'Jātinirṇayam' are cited in studies of Kerala's renaissance to demonstrate the internal push from within Hindu society for reform. Researchers argue that Guru's poetic framing of caste issues – using reason and scriptural allusions – gave moral strength to the movement for social equality.

Similarly, Guru's discussed in peace studies as an indigenous expression of a global ethic. Such social readings situate Guru's literature in the context of colonial

and post-colonial reform. Scholars note that unlike many social reformers who wrote prose tracts or made speeches, Guru encapsulated reformist ideas in poetry, which in a largely oral culture, enhanced their reach and impact. Therefore, academically, Guru's work is often examined as a successful case of literature functioning as social critique.

1.4.3.4 Comparative and Cross-Cultural Studies

Guru's works have been compared with those of other great thinkers and poets, both within India and beyond. Comparative literature scholars sometimes draw parallels between Guru and Adi Shankaracharya (another Kerala-born sage who wrote in Sanskrit) – noting that both emphasised jnana (knowledge) and advaita. Some have compared Guru's poetic style to that of Kabir or Tukaram (saint-poets of North India and Maharashtra respectively), as all three conveyed mystical ideas in the vernacular for common folk. Cross-philosophical analyses have juxtaposed Guru's teachings with the Buddha's teachings – since Guru espoused compassion and questioned ritualism much like the Buddha did.

Interestingly, in global comparative studies, Guru has been placed alongside figures like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, because of his fusion of the spiritual and the rational, and even alongside Rumi, for his focus on unity and love. These studies underscore that Guru's voice, while rooted in Hindu philosophy, has a universality that invites comparison with diverse philosophical and literary traditions around the world. Such comparative studies not only honour Guru by placing him in the pantheon of world thinkers, but they also bring fresh perspectives – for example, examining how Guru's idea of 'one caste, one religion' resonates with modern concepts of universal human rights.

1.4.3.5 Continuing Research and Modern Interpretations

Contemporary scholars continue to find new dimensions in Guru's poetry. In recent decades, there have been studies on Guru's relevance to topics like environmental ethics (seeing his reverence for all life as early eco-consciousness), gender (analysing how Guru, unlike many of his contemporaries, had women disciples and wrote verses emphasizing inner purity over gender roles), and science vs spirituality (some writers explore Guru's rational approach as complementary to scientific thinking).

Guru's works are included in university syllabi across Kerala and even elsewhere in India, often in courses on modern Indian literature, religious studies, or philosophy. M.A. and Ph.D. students have produced theses on various aspects of Guru's writings – from linguistic studies of his Malayalam style to theological studies of his concept of the Absolute. At seminars and literary festivals, Guru's poetry is sometimes recited and discussed, affirming that it's not just a historical artifact but a living body of work that continues to inspire interpretation. For example, a recent literary conference might discuss how Guru's metaphor of the railway can be read in the context of globalisation – showing how each generation finds contemporary meaning in his imagery. Finally, modern interpreters like Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati (a late 20th-century scholar and disciple in Guru's lineage) have written commentary books unpacking Guru's verses line by line for today's readers, indicating that the appetite for understanding his work remains strong.

1.4.3.6 Influence on Dalit and Subaltern Studies

Modern Dalit literary scholars often acknowledge Sree Narayana Guru as a precursor to Dalit literature in Kerala. While Guru himself hailed from an oppressed caste and wrote against casteism, he is not classified as a 'Dalit writer' in the modern sense (since that movement emerged later). However, subaltern studies experts note that Guru's life and works laid important groundwork for articulating the Dalit experience. By asserting the dignity of all human beings and attacking Brahmanical caste ideology through his writings, Guru paved the way for later Dalit voices to be taken seriously.

Guru was arguably the first in Kerala to boldly say in a public forum (through his Aruvippuram installation and associated poem) that an Ezhava can consecrate a Shiva – a radical act of defying social hierarchy. This is seen as an early act of Dalit assertion. His poetry likewise embodies a spiritual egalitarianism that implicitly rejects the notion of 'high' and 'low' humans. Scholars of subaltern studies often credit Guru with creating a discursive space where marginalised voices could speak about equality. In literary terms, this means Dalit writers of Kerala (from the late 20th century onward, like Cherukad or C. Ayyappan) could invoke Guru as a legitimising figure in their fight against caste in literature. Thus, Guru's critical acclaim also includes this facet: he is hailed as a pioneer by those who came much later, fighting battles that are an extension of the ones he fought with pen and prayer.

1.4.3.7 Literary Historiography and Alternative Models

When discussing literary history, other issues also surface. For nearly fifty years, academic discourse on the history of Malayalam literature has developed using Western literary-historical models, which spread in India through colonial education systems. This is not unique to Malayalam; many Indian languages show similar tendencies in their academic engagements with literary history. Models drawn from textbooks that gained prominence in early twentieth-century England, like classical, neoclassical, romantic, and modernist frameworks, were adapted and presented here as universal categories. These terms gained acceptance and were used to demarcate literary movements and moments. However, we have not fully examined the implications of this imposed literary consciousness, nor the shifts they caused in our cultural self-understanding. By 'literary culture,' we do not mean merely texts, ideas, or expressions accessible through interpretation. It also includes reading habits, linguistic practices, bodily and mental disciplines, and experiential configurations that shape individuals and communities.

Literature, as we now conceive it, becomes distinct from its surroundings during a specific moment in the dynamic flow of language, memory, and social exchange. This transformation did not occur simultaneously or uniformly across the world. A closer look reveals that even the word 'literature' has had different meanings in different socio-cultural and historical contexts. It cannot be said to have a distinct, autonomous existence detached from practice and habit. (*Vaakkum Vakthavum: Sreenarayanarachanakalile Kaavyaanubhavam* by Udayakumar) P.N. Gopakrishnan states that the most widespread reception Sree Narayana Guru received in Malayalam was ironically in Ammaṭṭu (folk or simplified narratives). While he invoked Advaita (non-dualism), a compelling question remains: why did

others who used Advaita not become what he became? If we fail to ask that question, we risk burying Guru in the mechanistic ideas of Māyā and Advaita inherited and repeated uncritically. The divine imagined in 'Daivadaśakam' is akin to a God of the post-industrial era, one conceivable only in the language and thought of societies shaped by the industrial revolution, like the steam engine discovered by James Watt. Such a God cannot exist in the older worlds or languages. When we read lines like:

'നീയല്ലോ സൃഷ്ടിയും സ്രഷ്ടാവായതും
സൃഷ്ടിജാലവും'

You are the creation
And he, who became the creator
And the countless creations;
Oh God! You, yourself became
The instrument of creation.

(Trans: Muttath Sudha)

In light of this modern consciousness, the divine seems closer to a factory foreman overseeing production than to a metaphysical abstraction from ancient traditions.

Likewise, a line such as: 'നീ സത്യം ജ്ഞാനമാനന്ദം' (Thou art the truth, wisdom and the ultimate bliss) feels closer to the programmatic goals of modern democracy than to an Upaniṣadic utterance. Thus, Sree Narayana Guru's poetry and actions functioned as a counter-cultural construction, not of an alternative order like Marxism, but through a reimagining of the existing. Rather than discarding tradition, he worked from within to bring about transformation. He saw tradition not as static but as something with continuity (paramparyaṅṅal uṇṭ), yet recognised that real change is not possible without revolutionary value-additions.

When we travel through Guru's poetry, we enter a liminal space where old practices end and new ones begin, without clearly knowing where that transition occurs. He did not believe in a clear binary between the old and the new, and even in his critique of tradition, he kept the doors of dialogue open. What we call modernity in culture is not merely about new sensibilities or feelings. It also involves reinterpreting the past in a new light. Without such reinterpretation, we cannot provide the nourishment, metaphorically, the water and fertiliser, that new times require. Therefore, Guru's works must be read on two levels, as Umberto Eco called 'double coding.' While the surface of the text speaks to contemporary values, its depth reinterprets the past. That's why even the invocation 'നീ' (thou) in 'Daivadaśakam' becomes meaningful only when read as a redefinition of Advaita. It no longer functions within the rigid framework centred on the Aryan bull metaphor that traditional Advaita relied on. Without a material grounding, Guru's Advaita would not hold.

1.4.4 Reinterpreting Aruvippuram and the Temple as Modern Installation

Guru's modernity lies in his redefinitions of rigid, materialist constructs. For instance, Aruvippuram Pratiṣṭha (the Aruvippuram installation), performed in the princely state of Tiruvitamkoor (Travancore), where caste consciousness permeated both governance and justice, was a radical act. If we read it merely as a variation of temple consecration, it shrinks to a reformist gesture. But if we consider it a modern installation, we can better understand it as a revolutionary cultural act, executed through a form of sculptural intervention. Here, the image (vigraha) is replaced with a stone (śila); varna (caste purity) is replaced with

avarna (castelessness); Brahminhood is replaced with a self-willed renunciate. Moreover, what is designated as the 'temple' (kṣetra) here is not marked as a traditional site of worship but as a consciously crafted modern space. Unlike other temples adorned with puranic slokas or mythological inscriptions, Guru's temple bore a modern poem etched into the wall, arguably the first political poem in Malayalam:

"ജാതിഭേദം മതദ്വേഷം ഏതുമില്ലാതെ
സർവ്വരും സോദരത്വേന വാഴുന്ന
മാതൃകാസ്ഥാനമാണിത്"

"Devoid of dividing walls, of caste or race or heatred or rival faith we all live here in brotherhood"

This declaration was not merely about inclusive temple access. It signalled the creation of a new socio-cultural space, a mātrikā-sthānam (model abode), designed not only to welcome the previously excluded but to transform those who entered. The power of this stone and this verse in the caste-ridden landscape of Kerala arguably surpassed the corrective impact of the Enlightenment slogans of liberty, equality, and fraternity advanced by the French Revolution. This new space, born of a poem and a stone, mounted a direct challenge to the decayed social consciousness of the past. It was this vision that expanded into institutions like the S.N.D.P Yogam, the Sarvamata Sammelanam (All Religion Conference), and the Śivagiri Pilgrimage. It is important to recall that in Tiruvitamkoor, religious ideology reigned supreme. For alternative political or social ideologies to gain a foothold, they had to pass through this religious matrix. Even secular consciousness had to arise from a reformation of religious imagination. Guru's task, therefore, was to secularise religion itself, or more precisely, to make religious consciousness function within a secular framework.

1.4.5 Enduring Legacy and Contemporary Relevance

Sree Narayana Guru's poetry continues to resonate strongly with contemporary audiences, scholars, and social reformers. Its timeless philosophical insights, ethical clarity, and artistic beauty ensure that his literary legacy extends beyond the historical confines of the Kerala Renaissance. Guru's influence today can be seen in modern literature, social movements, spiritual discourses, and academic research.

1.4.5.1 Influence on Modern Literature and Arts

Guru's poetry has inspired generations of writers and artists. Many later Malayalam poets and authors reference Guru either explicitly or through themes he populariserised. For instance, the theme of social equality in Malayalam poetry and prose owes much to Guru's influence. The Malayalam drama and film industries have also paid tribute: there have been plays and movies based on Guru's life (such as the Malayalam film Yugapurushan, 2010) and the values he espoused. His verses or quotes often serve as titles or epigraphs in literary works.

Beyond literature, Guru's words have been set to music and sung as devotional songs or rallying anthems. The famous line 'One Caste, One Religion, One God' has been incorporated into countless songs and even popular art (murals, posters, etc.) in Kerala. Visual artists have depicted Guru and scenes from his life in paintings and sculptures – for example, a 24-feet statue of Narayana Guru stands in Thiruvananthapuram as a cultural

landmark. Cultural organisations and literary forums in Kerala nearly always include recitations of Guru's poems in their events, indicating that his work is firmly enshrined in the cultural consciousness. His poems are also standard texts in schools and colleges in Kerala, meaning young people continue to encounter and appreciate his literary genius as part of their education.

1.4.5.2 Continuing Relevance in Social Justice and Human Rights

Guru's strong stance against caste discrimination, social inequality, and violence retains powerful relevance in current discussions on human rights and social justice. In an era where issues of identity and equality are still at the fore (though in different forms), Guru's voice offers a guiding principle of unity and non-violence. Activists promoting communal harmony often invoke his declaration 'One Caste, One Religion, One God for Man (One in kind, lne in faith, one in God in man) as a call for inter-religious and inter-caste unity. This slogan is as effective now as it was a century ago in reminding communities to rise above narrow divisions.

Likewise, in Gandhian and pacifist circles, Guru's poetic advocacy of ahimsa is cited in discussions against growing violence. It aligns with the global message of peace. Moreover, as conversations around marginalised communities (be it caste, race, or others) continue worldwide, Guru's insistence on human dignity for the oppressed provides a moral touchstone. Scholars writing on human rights sometimes mention that Guru was a pioneer who intuitively understood human rights before the term was formally defined. His celebration of compassion and condemnation of exploitation make his poetry a reservoir of humanist thought that activists and thinkers can draw from even today.

1.4.5.3 Spiritual and Philosophical Resonance

In the realm of spirituality, Guru's poetic works – especially Atmopadeśa Śatakam and Darśanamālā – continue to serve as guidebooks for spiritual seekers. His teachings of self-realisation, non-duality (advaita), and inner purity transcend sectarian boundaries. People of various faiths and philosophies find wisdom in his words, because he spoke of universal truths (like the ephemeral nature of life, the need for selfless love, etc.) that apply to all. Modern spiritual teachers in Kerala (and some in other parts of India) often quote Guru. For instance, at yoga and meditation centres, one might hear Guru's analogies (like the wave and ocean) being used to explain deep meditative states.

Additionally, Guru's integration of rational thinking with spirituality resonates with contemporary audiences who seek a faith that does not conflict with reason. In an age of science, Guru's approach – which often used logic and simple observation (e.g., 'no one likes to be hurt, therefore non-violence is dharma) – is refreshing and relevant. It appeals to the modern mind that might be skeptical of blind faith but is open to spiritual ideas presented rationally. Internationally, Narayana Guru's name is being introduced to audiences interested in comparative spirituality. As noted in comparative studies, he is being placed alongside poets like Rumi or philosopher-saints like Lao Tzu, highlighting that his spiritual poetry has a global appeal. Translations of Guru's works into English and other languages (French, German, etc.) have further carried his spiritual resonance abroad.

1.4.5.4 Academic Integration and Ongoing Research

In academia, Guru's poetry is widely included in curricula across Kerala and in some Indian universities as well. Courses on Malayalam literature invariably study a portion of Guru's verses. There are even specialised elective courses or modules on 'Sree Narayana Guru Studies' that details his literature and philosophy in depth. This academic interest encourages continuous research. In recent years, scholars have explored Guru's ideas in new lights – for example, environmental ethics (looking at his call for non-violence as extending to nature and animals, since he also spoke against animal sacrifice and cruelty) and gender justice (some re-examining how Guru's movement opened educational opportunities for women of his community).

Others have analysed Guru's concept of 'rational spirituality', showing how he prefigured later movements that try to reconcile scientific worldview with spiritual practice. Conferences and symposiums on Kerala Renaissance or Indian literature regularly feature papers on Guru. This indicates that academically he is a wellspring that has not run dry. Each generation of scholars finds something new – perhaps a previously untranslated work of his, or a new interpretation more suited to contemporary values. The Bibliography and research output on Narayana Guru has been steadily growing, evidencing sustained critical acclaim in the scholarly world.

1.4.5.5 Impact on Dalit and Marginalised Literature

As discussed, Guru's advocacy for the oppressed continues to inspire Dalit writers and activists. In Kerala, later 20th -century Dalit poetry that emerged – poets like Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan or Vijayan – often explicitly or implicitly connect back to the path shown by Narayana Guru. The subaltern narratives in Kerala's literature (stories and poems told from the point of view of the oppressed) regard Guru as a forefather who first articulated the pain and hopes of the marginalised in a dignified way. Notably, Guru wrote in Malayalam at a time when high literature was dominated by Brahmin Sanskrit scholars or upper-caste themes. By writing about the Ezhava experience and by elevating Malayalam language to philosophical heights, he validated the worth of local language and 'lower-caste' voices in literature.

Dalit literary critics highlight this contribution: Guru broke barriers not only socially but also in literature, making it easier for Dalit and other marginalised voices to enter the literary mainstream later. While Dalit literature as a self-identified movement took off in Kerala in the 1970s and 80s, many such writers mention being inspired by Narayana Guru's life or reading his works at some point. Thus, his legacy among marginalised literature is that of a revered elder who proved that literature can be a tool of emancipation.

1.4.5.6 Global Recognition and Comparative Relevance

In recent times, Sree Narayana Guru's works have begun attracting international attention. His universal themes of love, compassion, unity, and equality resonate with global audiences interested in spiritual and humanistic literature. Comparative literature studies have placed Guru alongside world-renowned poet-saints. For instance, scholars have drawn parallels between Guru and Rabindranath Tagore (who actually met Guru in 1922 and reportedly said he had never met anyone spiritually greater). Both Tagore

and Guru spoke of universal human unity, though in different contexts. Similarly, Guru's emphasis on non-violence and truth connects him with Mahatma Gandhi on the world stage, and indeed Gandhi's acknowledgment of Guru helped broadcast Guru's name globally.

Today, excerpts of Guru's writings are sometimes quoted in international books on spirituality. Translations of his key works exist in English, and some in French, German, and other languages, making them accessible to non-Malayalam readers. International conferences on topics like peace, interfaith dialogue, or Vedanta philosophy have included discussions of Narayana Guru. For example, UNESCO-sponsored events on peace education in South Asia have referenced Guru's teachings as part of India's heritage of non-violence. In summary, the comparative relevance of Guru is evident in how frequently his name now appears alongside figures like Rumi, Kabir, Tagore, Thoreau, or Gandhi in discussions about building a compassionate and rational world. His legacy has expanded beyond Kerala's borders, and his critical acclaim as a poet has evolved into recognition as a world spiritual figure whose poetry carries a message for all humanity.

1.4.5.7 Guru's Poetry as Cultural Constitution

Guru's Poetry as Constitutional Practice: In this light, Guru's poetry constitutes nothing less than a drafting of a new constitution. These are not merely literary works with political undertones, they are explicitly political compositions. No constitution can survive without material foundations. At the same time, it must also serve as a moral code. A work like Ātmopadēśa Śatakam must therefore be read today as a kind of ethical scripture. Moreover, for any modern idea to become operative, it must undergo a material redefinition. This is precisely what Ātmopadēśa Śatakam achieves. One key to this is the modern value it emphasises: prayatnam (effort, striving). In both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, major philosophers, poets, and cultural theorists have attempted to define and reinterpret the idea of prayatnam. Gandhi and Marx both gave serious attention to the concept. The poet Balachandran Chullikkad once cited Octavio Paz who referred to 'effort' as the most sterile yet inescapable deity of our times, and described human hands as those that break granite with determination. In physics, work (pravṛtti) is defined as force applied across displacement. If there is no displacement, there is no work done. In Ātmopadēśa Śatakam, Guru defines effort in just such concrete terms, not as abstract spiritualism, but as a cultural equation.

Guru writes:

അപരനുവേണ്ടിയഹർന്നിശം പ്രയത്നം
കൃപണത വിട്ടുകൃപാലു ചെയ്തിടുന്നു;
കൃപണനധോമുഖനായ്ക്കിടന്നു ചെയ്യു-
ന്നപജയകർമ്മമവന്നു വേണ്ടി മാത്രം.

(Those who possess empathy shall tactfully strive day and night to do selfless service to strengthen the neighborhood). These lines highlight the importance of effort for the sake of the other (apara). True effort, even extraordinary effort, is necessary not for selfish gain but for neighbourly compassion. The concept of 'ayal' (the other, the neighbour) has no place in caste society (jāti samhita), which recognises only one's own people (svajana). But in a plural public society, ayal becomes the very condition for humanity. Therefore, the striving to uplift the other becomes not just effort, but utmost effort (atiprayatnam). Such a vision cannot be realised in a caste-based society; it only thrives in a post-caste civil society.

Guru's modernity lies here, not in his alignment with bourgeois ideals, but in his resistance to exploitation, the central trait of capitalism. Where capitalism merges generosity with extraction, Guru's ethics draw a clear boundary. His poems do not serve as advertisements, but as ideological interventions. Guru replaces exploitative rhetoric like 'God's own country' with a land where; all live in brotherhood: 'സോദരത്വേന വാഴുന്ന മാതൃകാസ്ഥാന മാണിത്'. Here, anukampa (compassion) becomes the higher replacement for both violence and exploitation. It becomes the foundational value upon which a truly equal society can be built, a value that elevates human dignity to the level of universal rights, even suggesting that 'not even an ant should suffer' (oru peeda yerumpinum varutharuthu).

Guru positioned himself as a critical insider, dismantling the religious structures from within and imbuing philosophies like Advaita with ethical agency in the real world. His greatest contribution is this recasting of religion, God, and humanity through a modern ethical lens, and his poetry is the clearest trail left behind in this transformative journey. When Guru says he consecrated an Ezhava Śiva (Ezhavashivan), as Natarajaguru and others have echoed (namuṭe Śivan), he is not invoking a regressive caste identity but rather asserting an anti-caste subjectivity. When he declares 'namukku jātiyilla' (We have no caste), he shifts the self into a post-caste subject position. These statements are not contradictory. They echo the same philosophical clarity as that of Basavanna, who also denounced static social categories and embraced transformative identity. Guru did not address a psychological issue, but a historical question, a question of societal structure. Guru effectively subverted the traditional concept of sannyāsa (monastic renunciation), which was rooted in scriptural law, by introducing his own idea of self-renunciation (sva-sannyāsa). In doing so, he turned sannyāsa into a cultural space of inquiry, one that could generate constant questioning. Even as Hinduism was becoming increasingly institutionalised, he breached its boundaries and brought forth a sannyāsi who could ask uncomfortable questions for the first time in recorded history. He did not found a maṭham (monastery); he established a Dharma Saṅgham (Spiritual Fellowship). Not an Ezhava Mahasabha, but an order to uphold Sree Narayana Dharma. His act was not one of negation but of radical reinterpretation. And through poetry, he extended this reinterpretive act into the domain of culture.

In 1921, Guru wrote Anukampā Daśakam (Ten Verses on Compassion). The seventh verse contains this astonishing line:

പുരുഷാകൃതി പൂണ്ട ദൈവമോ?
നരദിവ്യാകൃതി പൂണ്ട ധർമ്മമോ?
പരമേശപവിത്രപുത്രനോ?
കരുണാവാൻ നബി മുത്തുരത്നമോ?

(Is God in the form of man? Or Dharma in the divine form of man? Is He the Most Holy Son of God? Or the Merciful Prophet, the Pearl of Nobility?).

As P.N. Gopikrishnan pointed out, this is the first time in Malayalam poetry, or indeed in any Indian spiritual literature, that the word 'Nabi' (Prophet) is used so authoritatively by a sannyāsi. In his journey as a critical insider, Guru effortlessly integrates the Prophet into the philosophical and spiritual frameworks of renunciation and even into the Hindu cultural imagination. This marks a watershed moment in Indian secularism. The lines beginning with: 'ജാതിഭേദം മതദ്വേഷം...' have as much significance in political and cultural history as the lines

from Anukampā Daśakam quoted above. These verses show that democracy in secularism is not exclusion but inclusion, not casting out the 'other,' but absorbing them into the shared ethical universe.

In this same poem, Jesus appears as the 'Paramesha Pavitra Puthran' (The Most Holy Son of God). Names are rarely mentioned, instead, Guru uses attributes and epithets. Krishna is 'paramārthamurachu tērvitum poruḷum'; Buddha is 'bhūtadayaakṣamābali'; Śaṅkara is 'saraḷādvaya bhāṣyakāraṇām guru'; and so on. Yet Nabi is not veiled in metaphor. He is directly named: 'Karunavān Nabi Muthurathnamo?' (Is he the compassionate Prophet, the noble pearl?), a line that grants, for the first time, literary citizenship to the Prophet in the 'republic' of Malayalam literature. Rewriting Caste: From 'Jāti Nirṇayam' to Jāti Lakṣaṇam In Paramesha Pavitra Puthrano? Karunavaan Nabi Muthurathnamo?

P.N. Gopikrishnan states that in the continuing efforts to eradicate caste, Guru's poem ''Jāti Nirṇayam'' (On the Determination of Caste) stands as a foundational text. Its very title reflects its purpose, a rational examination of caste. But the significance of the poem extends well beyond this. It is not merely a regional version of anti-caste discourse as advanced by subaltern bhakti movements. Rather, it marks the beginning of a modern democratic consciousness in Malayalam poetry. More importantly, 'Jāti Nirṇayam' is also the first attempt in Malayalam literature to confront caste from outside the boundaries of religion. Until then, most caste critique emerged from within religious traditions.

Guru stepped outside that framework and looked at caste as a cultural and epistemological problem. What makes this poem especially important is that it critiques caste both ideologically and scientifically. Guru recognised that caste is not just a system of belief but also a social reality that must be evaluated in the light of reason, biology, and ethics. This multidimensional critique is what gives his poetry enduring relevance. Octavio Paz once wrote about the historical moment when poetry, philosophy, and science were not yet separated, and how returning to that integrated state could be a means of reclaiming knowledge. Guru's approach in 'Jāti Nirṇayam' exemplifies this idea. He asks of poetry the kinds of questions that are normally asked of philosophy and science. As K.G.S. notes, the most significant line in 'Jāti Nirṇayam' is: 'സംസ്കാരത്തിന്റെ ലബോറട്ടറിയിൽ കവി ശാസ്ത്രജ്ഞനെപ്പോലെ ചിലപ്പോൾ പെരുമാറും'.(In the laboratory of culture, the poet sometimes behaves like a scientist.) Here, poetry becomes a form of social diagnosis. It does not derive its secular spirit from atheism or Western Enlightenment values, but from the cultural knowledge systems native to the subcontinent.

Guru does not borrow secularism from external models. He evolves it from within Indian traditions. The Sanskrit verse: 'മനുഷ്യാണാം മനുഷ്യത്വം ജാതിർ ഗോത്വം ഗവാം യഥാ' (Humanity is the essence of humans, just as cow-ness is the essence of cows) It is not a mere poetic metaphor. It is a biological and ontological truth. If a cow is recognised by its essential cow-nature, then a human is recognised by humanity, not by caste. This is a philosophical reorientation that draws from life sciences and ontology. From here emerges the understanding that humanity is not a label to be imposed from the outside but a biological condition to be recognised. And if caste cannot be biologically justified, then it must be

culturally and ethically rejected.

From Birth to Brotherhood: Extending the Argument in Jāti Lakṣaṇam Guru deepens this biological-humanistic vision in his composition Jāti Lakṣaṇam (The Characteristics of Caste). If 'Jāti Nirṇayam' questioned caste at the point of birth, Jāti Lakṣaṇam expands it to include love, touch, sound, colour, heat, and cold, all the sensory conditions that define human experience. Here, Guru says: caste cannot be identified by birth, nor by appearance or sensation. Instead, humans are to be identified by their embodied, living, sentient being. The poem argues: 'The way people are born, the way they feel heat, cold, pain, smell, these are shared across humanity. So where is caste in all this?' This is a clinical examination of caste, not one aimed at identifying physical illness, but a diagnosis of caste as a social disease. Guru was a spiritual physician, a visionary whose goal was not just bodily health, but social healing. If we read his writings with this in mind, we understand that for him, medicine was not merely a curative discipline, but a transformative philosophy of health and equality.

In Aṣṭāṅga Hṛdaya, God is described as the Mahāvaidya (the Great Healer). Guru builds on this idea and extends it to envision a new model of collective health, sāmūhika ārogyaṁ, achieved through jāti nirmārjanam (caste eradication). Redefining Knowledge, Labour, and the Divine the Karuvān metaphor in Jāti Lakṣaṇam is especially revealing. It is perhaps the only instance where Guru names a caste directly. And yet, he redefines the Karuvān not by ritual or ancestry, but by labour and knowledge: 'അറിവാം കരുവാൻ ചെയ്ത കരുവാണി മോർക്കുകിൽ കരുവാർന്നിനിയും മാറി വരുമീ വന്നതൊക്കെയും' (Whatever has come and whatever is yet to come, remember, it was all done by the Karuvān through knowledge.) Here, Karuvān becomes the embodiment of knowledge and labour, the symbol of the modern working class. The poet severs caste from occupation and reassigns value based on intellect and productivity. Guru's God is not a Brahmanical abstraction. It is a labouring deity, a divine artisan, a cultural worker.

Thus, in Guru's vision, knowledge that escapes caste becomes skill, and skill becomes cultural evolution. Democratic Humanism and the Cultural Legacy of Sree Narayana Guru's poetry reshaped the political and spiritual imagination of Malayalam language and culture. Through his verses, he imagined a society where democracy, human rights, and secularism are not merely state-imposed frameworks, but lived ethical practices. His poetry offered a new vocabulary of justice, grounded not in abstract ideologies but in compassion (anukampā), empathy, and knowledge. From this emerged the two key streams of 20th-century Malayalam poetry: Political poetry that speaks for justice, and Philosophical poetry that seeks meaning beyond the material. Both currents can be traced to Guru's verses, particularly to compositions like 'Jāti Nirṇayam', 'Ātmopadeśa Śatakam', 'Daiva Daśakam', and 'Anukampā Daśakam'. Kumaran Asan taught Malayalis to value love (prēmaṁ) as an ethical sentiment. His ability to elevate love into a moral ideal is, in part, an inheritance from Guru's rearticulation of compassion (karuṇā), grace (aruḷ), and mercy as foundational values. In this sense, Guru redefined jñāna (knowledge) itself as a cultural virtue, as seen in poems like Aṟivu.

1.4.6 Guru's Redefinition of Poetic Purpose

Guru's redefinition of poetry as a transformative tool, not for mere expression, but for cultural reimagination, marks a turning point. He altered the very pathway from language to consciousness, showing that language is not a mirror of reality but a means of reshaping it. He made it clear: poetry is not about ornamenting truth, but about unshackling it. Poetry, for Guru, is not a flower placed atop a coffin as an aesthetic gesture. Rather, it is a weapon of liberation, a cultural mandate, and a social contract. His poetic voice was not mystical in the escapist sense, it was mystical in that it revealed unity where there appeared difference and evoked the divine through the material. 'Poetry is the art of rewriting reality', that is how Guru enacted his literary revolution. From Philosophy to Social Transformation Guru's philosophical works, especially 'Ātmopadeśa Śatakam', Darsanamāla, and 'Daiva Daśakam', reflect what Sukumar Azhikode called 'the tide of self-realisation' (ātmāsākṣātkāratthinṟe tiraṁ). He also considered 'Ātmopadeśa Śatakam' as the Bhagavad Gītā of Malayalam.

These works are not limited to metaphysical musings. They take on profound, often unanswerable questions: What is the nature of the universe? What is consciousness? What is life? Guru reflects on these with a modern interpretive lens, fusing Vedanta, science, and poetic experience to offer what we may call a rational spirituality. Take, for instance, the reflection on universal empathy:

പ്രിയമൊരു ജാതിയിതെൻ പ്രിയം, ത്വദീയ-
പ്രിയമപര പ്രിയമെന്നനേകമായി
പ്രിയവിഷയം പ്രതി വന്നിടും ഭ്രമം; തൻ-
പ്രിയമപരപ്രിയമെന്നറിഞ്ഞിടേണം.

(My love is for this caste, yours for another, let this delusion end. We must realise: what is dear to you is dear to me too, for we are one.)

In this ethical framework, personal affection transforms into universal humanism. This message, embedded in Guru's 'Ātmopadeśa Śatakam', becomes all the more relevant in today's fragmented world. 'Daiva Daśakam': A Prayer Beyond Borders 'Daiva Daśakam' is a luminous miniature, a prayer-poem composed by Guru in 1914 for the inmates of the Śivagiri Maṭham. It opens with a call to the divine, imagined as Aṟivu (Knowledge): 'ദൈവമേ കാത്തുകൊൾകങ്ങു കൈവിടാതിങ്ങു ഞങ്ങളെ' (O God, protect us, may we never go astray.) And it ends in a cosmic benediction:

ആഴമേറും നിൻമഹസ്സാ-
മാഴിയിൽ ഞങ്ങളാകവേ
ആഴണം വാഴണം നിത്യം
വാഴണം വാഴണം സുഖം.

(May we live in joy, forever immersed in the oceanic greatness of Your light.) Here, God is not sectarian. The poem is a universal prayer, one that any person from any faith can utter. This universality, what Nitya Chaitanya Yati described as its sārvajanīnatvaṁ, makes 'Daiva Daśakam' not just a poem, but a manifesto of spiritual democracy. Guru's final act of departure, as biographers recount, was done while listening to this very poem.

Sree Narayana Guru's poetry is a history of both material intervention and spiritual transformation. He understood the hidden power of language, to unsettle, to enlighten, and to rebuild. His verses, whether inscribed on temple walls or in meditative silence, helped birth Kerala's renaissance, socially, culturally and spiritually. As he wrote on the wall of the temple at Aruvippuram:

ജാതിഭേദം മതദ്വേഷം ഏതുമില്ലാതെ
സർവ്വരും സോദരത്വേന വാഴുന്ന
മാതൃകാസ്ഥാനമാണിത്

(This is a model place where all live as brothers, without caste differences or religious hatred.) This, says P.N. Gopikrishnan, is the first political poem in Malayalam, a literary act that sparked social reordering, poetic innovation, and ethical modernity. Guru's poetry was not a retreat from politics. It was a constitution in verse. It did not merely describe the world. It set out to change it. During his lifetime, Guru's poetry earned admiration from many quarters – notably Mahatma Gandhi in 1925 recognised Guru's works in Kerala. Guru's disciple Kumaran Asan and fellow poets like Vallathol and Ulloor praised his verses.

Recap

- Guru's poetry attracted immediate admiration from Kerala's reformist press.
- Rabindranath Tagore extolled the 'yogic eyes' behind Guru's minimalist verses.
- Mahatma Gandhi praised the fusion of spiritual insight and practical reform.
- Early critics noted Guru's radical economy of diction.
- Translations into Sanskrit, Tamil and Hindi began during Guru's own lifetime.
- Post-Independence scholars positioned him within the Kerala Renaissance canon.
- Dalit and subaltern studies reclaimed Guru as a forerunner of emancipatory literature.
- Modern linguists emphasise his blend of Sanskritised elegance and colloquial clarity.
- More than 110 languages now host versions of Guru's poems.
- Global conferences, from Oxford to Osaka, regularly feature panels on his work.
- Comparative religionists link Guru's advaita vision to global mystic traditions.
- His slogan 'oru jati, oru matam' is quoted in civic-rights discourse.
- Contemporary poets cite Guru as a model of ethically grounded art.

- Documentary films and graphic novels have popularised his life story.
- Digital archives ensure open access, inviting new generations to reinterpret his legacy.

Objective Questions

1. Which Nobel laureate poet admired Guru's 'yogic eyes'?
2. Which national leader hailed Guru's blend of spirituality and reform?
3. What do the critical studies often praise regarding Guru's diction.
4. Guru recast poetry as the Sanskrit concept of what?
5. What does Guru's slogan advocates regarding society?
6. Guru's works have been translated into roughly how many languages?
7. Subaltern readings of Guru's texts are linked to which academic field?
8. Posthumous global spread of translations accelerated in which century?
9. With which element Guru does merge kāvyānanda?
10. How is the Aruvippuram act seen in Kerala?

Answers

1. Tagore
2. Gandhi
3. Economy
4. Darshana
5. Unity
6. 110
7. Dalit
8. Twenty first
9. Brahmananda
10. Renaissance

Assignments

1. Assess the evolution of critical responses to Guru's poetry from colonial times to digital scholarship.
2. Discuss the role of translation in transforming Guru from regional poet to global spiritual voice.
3. Evaluate the significance of Tagore's and Gandhi's endorsements in shaping Guru's legacy.
4. Analyse how Dalit perspectives reinterpret Guru's anti-caste stance in the twenty-first century.
5. Examine the ethical and aesthetic implications of Guru's poetic minimalism.

SGOU

Poetic Diction

SGOU

BLOCK - 2

Poetic Diction as a Basic Component of Poetry

UNIT

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- know the connection between diction, vision, and philosophy in poetry
- familiarise how Guru's word choice enhances spiritual, social, and philosophical dimensions
- appreciate Guru's integration of sound, rhythm, and simplicity in poetic diction
- explore poetic diction as a tool for social transformation
- study, poetic diction as a basic component of poetry

Prerequisites

Poetic diction refers to the specific choice of words, expressions, and linguistic styles that a poet employs to convey not only meaning but also emotion, rhythm, and aesthetic experience. It is what distinguishes poetry from other forms of writing, elevating language beyond its utilitarian function to evoke deeper responses from the reader. Every poet crafts diction based on the themes they engage with, their philosophical inclinations, and the cultural context they inhabit. Poetic diction is the lifeblood of poetry. It is not merely the choice of words but the conscious selection of expressions, tones, and images that distinguishes poetry from ordinary speech. Unlike casual communication, where words serve primarily utilitarian purposes, poetic diction elevates language to convey complex emotions, profound philosophies, and aesthetic experiences.

Key Themes

Poetic Diction, Philosophy, Social Transformation, Spirituality, Rhythm, Simplicity, Aesthetic Experience

Discussion

Consider the difference between the simple statement, "The sun rises," and the poetic rendition, "The golden orb ascends, bathing the earth in its tender glow." The second expression transcends mere information, it paints an image, evokes emotion, and connects the phenomenon of sunrise to a universal aesthetic experience. This is the power of poetic diction, transforming ordinary speech into a medium that touches the senses, intellect, and soul simultaneously.

In the poetry of Sree Narayana Guru, poetic diction is not merely a stylistic choice but a deliberate and thoughtful selection of words aimed at conveying profound philosophical truths in the most accessible and resonant manner. Guru's diction reflects his vision of poetry as an instrument for social reform, spiritual awakening, and philosophical contemplation. It is simple yet profound, modern yet timeless, grounded in experience but reaching out to the metaphysical.

2.1.1 Poetic Diction and Spiritual Tone

In the article *Malayāḷakavithayude Ūrjjabhavanam Śrīnārāyaṇaguruvinṭe Kavithakaḷepatti*, R. Chandrabose states that Sree Narayana Guru was not merely the preceptor of Kerala's modern renaissance; he was also a spiritual master figure (gurusthaniyan) in the realm of modern Malayalam poetry. With around seventy works ranging from muktakas (short independent verses) to shatakams (hundred-verse compositions), Guru established a noble model in both philosophical content and literary form, deeply influencing the pattern of later Malayalam poetry belonging to the spiritual school.

Guru's compositions give prominence to dense and complex ideas. K. Damodaran, Guru's biographer, evaluates his poetic style in the following manner: "With no intricate language usages or meaningless words, (the river Saraswathy—the poetic in use) flows gracefully in shuddha manipravalam (pure Sanskrit-Malayalam blend). Though he chose the art of poetry merely as a vehicle for his matured thoughts, poetic ornaments (prasa-alankaras) emerge unknowingly within the verses, astonishing the reader." The luminous and majestic poetic style that leads readers to the summit of spiritual contemplation was, after Ezhuthacchan and Poonthanam, reintroduced to Malayalam poetry through Guru's compositions.

Guru's works can rightly be referred to as "the energy centre" (ūrjjabhavanam) of poetry, where spiritual sharpness is the true inner strength. Most of these verses, originally uttered directly by Guru, were later written down by his disciples. The disquieted internal churning, focused meditation, and realised vision of Advaita lend extraordinary emotional power to these poems. The jñānaśakti (spiritual-

intellectual force) of the ascetic who used ātmavidyā (self-knowledge) as a weapon for social reform resonates like a chant in his compositions.

Composed fluidly in Tamil, Malayalam, and Sanskrit, Guru's poetry presents an astonishingly original stream of verbal energy through its lexicon, imagery, metaphors, rhythm, and metre. Each work was purposeful.

M.K. Govindan, a direct disciple and companion of Guru, recorded his firsthand experience regarding Guru's method of poetic composition: "Swamigal never composed even a single line for poetry's sake. Every verse was written only to impart a philosophical truth to a seeker." (P.K. Balakrishnan, Nārāyaṇaguru, p. 103) Guru's body of work consists of stotras (hymns), philosophical verses, prayers, didactic poems, and messages. The literature of sages is often described as manifestations of the quest for truth. These poems uniquely combine knowledge (jñāna), devotion (bhakti), and bliss (ānanda).

Keertanas (devotional songs), a key product of the bhakti movement, which reversed hierarchical structures from lower castes to elites, helped democratise spiritual experience by transmitting spiritual joy and insight instantly to the masses. In Malayalam literature, Ezhuthacchan's Harināmakeertanam and Poonthanam's Jñānappāna stand as classical models of this genre.

Ayyappa Paniker remarks that Jñānappāna, which transforms bhakti into jñāna, is a brilliant model for stotra poetry (Kavidarshanam, p. 3) and is the most appropriate one to be added here.

Like Poonthanam, Sree Narayana Guru too redirected spiritual insight toward social critique. In Guru's context, composing hymns was a political act. At a time when Avarnas had no right even to enter temples, Guru, an Avarna himself, composed stotras (hymns) on deities to be worshipped by the Savarnas. This must be interpreted as an act of resistance and reform.

2.1.2 Guru's Definition of the Poet as a Sage

At the heart of Sree Narayana Guru's understanding of poetry is the belief that a true poet is a sage - a Rishi - endowed with vision (Darshanam). To him, poetry is not simply a creative art form but a sacred act of revelation. The poet is one who has seen the truth and uses words to share that vision with the world.

This classical notion is drawn from Bhattatautha's Kavya Kautukam, which states:

"He who is not a sage is not a poet. Vision is the essence of poetry. A poet is known for his capacity to see and describe the truth. Vision is clarity about the principles of expression and virtue."

Guru not only embraced this idea but also embodied it. His poetry, especially works like Atmopadesa Śatakam (One Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction), reflects this seer's vision. These verses are not designed for literary embellishment but as tools of philosophical instruction and spiritual awakening. For Guru, vision goes beyond intellectual understanding. It involves an inner clarity, a realisation of the principles governing life, ethics, and the cosmos. The poet, therefore, becomes a medium through whom wisdom flows, and poetic diction becomes the instrument of transmitting this wisdom. Guru's diction is carefully chosen to ensure that each word serves both aesthetic and philosophical

purposes. There is no place for excessive ornamentation or empty rhetoric. Instead, his words carry the weight of experience and realisation. His oft-quoted line:

"One Caste, One Religion, One God for Mankind"

(Translated in Jathi Nirnayam as one in kind, one in faith, one in God is man) is a prime example. Simple in form but vast in meaning, it demonstrates how poetic diction can distill profound social and spiritual philosophy into memorable, accessible words.

By positioning the poet as a sage, Guru redefines poetry as a vehicle for transformation—personal, social, and spiritual. His poetic diction reflects this mission. It resonates with compassion, clarity, and a deep commitment to universal values, making his works timeless and relevant across generations.

2.1.3 Poetic Diversity and the Structure of Address in Guru's Works

In the work *Vākkum Vaktāvum: Śrīnārāyaṇa Racanaḷile Kāvyānubhavam* by Udayakumar, the author mentions that Sree Narayana Guru's works reveal a wide range of expression, in theme (pratipādyam), emotive resonance (bhāvāviṣkāraṃ), and linguistic style (bhāṣārīti). His Malayalam verses span several categories: hymns (keertanams) addressed to deities like Śiva, Viṣṇu, Subrahmaṇya, and Devī; compositions that present bhakti as a form of suffering and surrender; philosophical texts dealing with Vedantic concepts; prayer/poems like Daivadaśakam; Jāti Nirṇayam and Jāti Lakṣaṇam that reflect lived realities from a metaphysical lens.

Even if we set aside Guru's prose works, Tamil compositions, Sanskrit texts, and translations, and focus only on his Malayalam verse, one cannot easily label all of them simply as "poems" or "kāvyams" in a uniform sense. This diversity prompts us to ask whether these texts express different conceptions and experiences of poetry itself.

We may even say that these works confront us with a compositional method that resists strict divisions like philosophy, poetry, and devotion. Hence, terms such as "poetry" and "kāvya" must be understood in light of the unique expressive features (prayōga rūpam) of these compositions.

When viewed from this perspective, the distinction between philosophical declarations and poetic expressions, between hymns that emphasise saguna bhakti (devotion to a deity with attributes) and prayers addressed to abstract divine concepts — all these distinctions are ultimately shaped by their performative structure.

A key feature here is the structure of address (abhisambōdhana) that operates within the poetry. This is not merely about identifying to whom the poem is addressed — whether to a personal deity, a formless concept of God (nirguṇa daivasaṅkalpam), an abstract idea, disciples, the public, or readers. These are only the surface-level forms of address.

What is more important is the internal turning of the poem within language: Which forms of agency (kartṛtvam) are being invoked? What space is created within language to accommodate these agencies? These are the deeper structural dimensions of address.

In this sense, reading, hearing, understanding, and experiencing the poem must all be seen as spaces where these forms of

agency are enacted through address.

Contemporary verse rarely offers such multi-layered interpretative scope as Guru's poems do. The difficulty lies not only in the conceptual weight they carry. Daivadaśakam, for instance, is a deeply philosophical work, yet it functions as an accessible, heartfelt prayer. But this is not true for all of Guru's writings.

Most of them demand serious engagement, they cannot be read effortlessly. They call for deep, sustained concentration and surrender. Without focused mental discipline, these poems do not reveal themselves. The flow of thought that exceeds the boundaries of the poetic line, the complex syntax that moves the eye and mind backward and forward, and the poetic method that pushes language beyond its aesthetic comfort, all of this is familiar to readers of Guru's poetry.

That is why the challenge posed by these works is not simply about poetry in a traditional sense. The complexities of syntactic structure, the layered interplay between words and lines, and the demand that the reader revisit and re-experience what has already been read or recited, all of these point to a style that resists casual engagement.

This is evident not only in the highly metaphysical texts but even in Guru's devotional verses praising Subrahmaṇya, Devī, Śiva, or Vāsudeva. These verses, too, ask the reader for a concentrated, inward experience.

2.1.4 Poetic Language as a Medium of Philosophy

In Sree Narayana Guru's poetry, language serves a purpose far greater than mere aesthetic pleasure, it becomes a medium for conveying profound philosophical truths. Guru saw poetry as an ideal platform to express his vision of life, the self, and the cosmos. His diction is inherently philosophical, marked by clarity, precision, and depth. Yet, it avoids esoteric jargon. Instead, Guru selects words that are simple, accessible, yet rich in meaning. His genius lies in the ability to translate complex metaphysical concepts into direct and relatable expressions without losing their philosophical gravity.

This is exemplified in his Atmopadesa Śatakam, where he writes:

"He who knows more than knowledge, within and without, that luminous seed, bow down to Him."

Here, "luminous seed" (Karu) symbolises the supreme self or the absolute reality, the source of all existence. The phrase is poetic, yet philosophical, capturing the essence of Advaitic thought with remarkable simplicity. Guru's diction often reflects the Upaniṣadic style, where layers of meaning unfold from seemingly simple verses. Just as the Upaniṣads use minimal words to express universal truths, Guru's poetic language serves as a pathway to introspection and self-realisation. Metaphors and allegories further enrich his diction. In one of his well-known images, the human body is likened to a chariot and the senses to horses. This age-old Vedantic metaphor is rejuvenated in his poetry, offering spiritual lessons wrapped in poetic beauty. Guru also demonstrates remarkable adaptability by incorporating contemporary imagery relevant to his time. References to steamships and railways symbolise the journey of life and the quest for liberation. This modern touch grounds his philosophy in real-world experiences, making it relatable and impactful.

Notably, Guru's poetic diction serves as not only a philosophical inquiry but

also a vehicle for social reform. His powerful lines:

"All are brothers, no one is inferior" are not just poetic but revolutionary, advocating equality and compassion.

"എല്ലാവരും സഹോദരങ്ങളാണ്, ആരും ആരുടെയും താഴെയല്ല എന്ന ആശയം കാവ്യാത്മകം എന്നതിലുപരി, സമത്വവും കാരുണ്യവും പ്രോത്സാഹിപ്പിക്കുന്ന വിപ്ലവ കരമായ ഒന്നാണ്."

Through his carefully crafted language, Guru ensures that poetry becomes a tool for awakening, inviting readers to reflect, question, and transcend. His words bridge the gap between the intellectual and the emotional, the spiritual and the social, making philosophy accessible to all.

2.1.5 Discrimination, Analysis, and the Language of Self-Inquiry

In the work Vākkum Vaktāvum: Śrīnārāyaṇa Racanaḷile Kāvyānubhavam, Udayakumar states that a deep undercurrent of discrimination (vivēchanam) and analysis (vilayanam) flows continuously through the writings of Sree Narayana Guru. The signs of discrimination are not limited to simple binary distinctions. Acts of separating and reuniting, analysing and integrating, these are often carried out using the concept of numbers. Without the notion of numbers, we cannot count; without the ability to count, we cannot even conceive of numbers. In a way, numbers are both the precondition and the tool for the act of counting.

Guru's poetry is replete with numbers. In the lines cited below, the word arurasam (ആറുരസം) is interpreted by commentators as denoting the six tastes — sour, bitter, etc. Both internal and external senses, their objects, and the resultant experiences are often suggested through numerical references.

For instance, in Ātmōpadēśaśatakam:

ഒളിമുതലാം പഴമഞ്ചുമുണ്ടു നാറും
നളികയിലേറി നയേന മാറിയാടും
കിളികളെയഞ്ചുമരിഞ്ഞു കീഴ്മറിക്കും
വെളിവുരുവേന്തിയകം വിളങ്ങീടേണം

The five fruits of a hidden origin
exude their worldly scent;
Those five birds that, perched upon a
stalk, dance with shifting guile,
Must be slain and subverted so that
the inner self, bearing the form of
pure Awareness, may shine forth in
splendour.

The five birds and the five-petalled lamp found here are such symbolic illustrations. In Arivu ("Knowledge"), the last verses are filled with numerical imagery

Here, arivu (knowledge) and ariyunnavan (knower) emerge in a sequence where numbers symbolise gradation in awareness. Thus, numbers and the faculty of counting form a part of Guru's poetic epistemology, the realm where discrimination is experienced.

Discrimination is supported by categories such as type (inam) and individual (vyakti). At the same time, these categories are also products of discrimination. Without categories, discrimination is not possible, and only through discrimination do these categories become perceivable. In Arivu, Guru points out that the category is the condition of knowledge. But in his Advaita, vivechanam becomes a stepping-stone to reach a higher plane of understanding.

The one who ascends the ladder of discrimination must ultimately discard the very rungs used to climb in order to realise the final truth. The term vilayanam (dissolution or absorption) helps us imagine the stage where the dominance of counting

and analysis disappears entirely.

A reader trying to approach Guru's works as poetry must necessarily contemplate the relationship between philosophy and poetic experience. The above lines urge us to think about the distinctions and connections between the two.

Philosophy and poetry are not universal or timeless categories. They are means shaped by language and thought, developed to function in specific historical and existential contexts. While philosophy operates with notions like discrimination, analysis, multiplicity, and unity, these conceptual tools are always open to critique and reconfiguration.

The intense shift in awareness that allows one to see the one through the many is not always explicable within philosophical discourse. The introspective articulation of such experience often unfolds beyond the realm of traditional philosophical reasoning. This realm has no fixed speaker or agency; instead, it forms and reshapes agencies based on the intensity of experience.

Such intensity without a fixed speaker is what defines much of what we refer to as poetry.

2.1.6 The Upaniṣadic Influence on Diction

Guru's poetic diction bears the unmistakable influence of Upaniṣadic teachings, both in content and style. The Upaniṣads are known for their pithy statements, where every word is loaded with philosophical significance. Guru adopts this approach, ensuring that his language is direct, symbolic, and profound.

For instance, in his invocation to God Daiva Dasakam, Guru:

"Sailor you,
Bhava sea your boat,
Your feet are my ferry."
'Your feet is the steamer
In which you are the salor
Invisible'

(Trans. Muttath Sudha)

These lines, while simple, capture the Upaniṣadic vision of the human condition—the world as a vast ocean (Bhava Sagaram), the divine as the guide, and surrender as the means of liberation. The language resonates with spiritual depth while remaining poetic and clear.

His poems often use natural symbols - seas, rivers, boats, light, and seeds - not merely as decorative imagery but as philosophical tools. Each symbol connects the physical with the metaphysical, inviting the reader to see the hidden spiritual reality behind the visible world.

Moreover, Guru's choice of words often includes Sanskrit and Tamil influences, reflecting his trilingual mastery. However, he consciously avoids heavy classical density, choosing words that could flow seamlessly into the everyday vocabulary of the common man.

2.1.7 Simplicity with Philosophical Depth

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Guru's poetic language is its simplicity that carries philosophical depth. He achieves what many poets struggle with—conveying abstract ideas without alienating the ordinary reader.

His verse on human equality:

"One caste, one religion, one God for mankind"

(One in kind, one in faith, one in God is man) is a perfect example of this. In a single line, Guru compresses a vast philosophical and ethical vision rooted in Advaita Vedanta and social reform. This is neither a mere slogan nor rhetoric; it is philosophy rendered poetically—a vision of unity and universal brotherhood expressed in the simplest possible diction.

Guru also uses common metaphors, such as "the body is foam, the self is the vast ocean", to illustrate the impermanence of the material world and the permanence of the soul. Such metaphors make his spiritual teachings accessible even to those uninitiated in Vedantic philosophy.

His poetry reflects an egalitarian spirit, where diction serves not to exclude but to invite. Guru believed that truth is universal and should be shared in a language understood by all, irrespective of caste, class, or educational status.

This simplicity is not accidental. It stems from Guru's own understanding of the limitations of language. He knew that words, by nature, have limitations to express complex thought, but when carefully chosen, they can point beyond themselves to the infinite.

2.1.8 Language as a Tool for Transformation

Ultimately, Guru's poetic language is designed for transformation - spiritual, intellectual, and social. His diction is a tool that awakens readers to their own inner divinity, challenges social injustices, and promotes universal values of compassion, equality, and unity.

Guru's poetry is not confined to abstract contemplation. His words inspire action, urging people to reject caste, embrace compassion, and realise the oneness of existence. His simplicity is deceptive; beneath the calm surface of his language lies revolutionary energy and spiritual power.

Through every poem, Guru reaffirms his belief that the purpose of language is not to divide, but to unite. His poetic diction stands as a model for how language can be beautiful, accessible, and deeply philosophical all at once.

2.1.9 Word Selection and Expression

One of the most distinctive and deliberate aspects of Sree Narayana Guru's poetic diction is his careful and conscious word selection. Unlike poets who sought elaborate ornamentation, Guru prioritized clarity, precision, and musicality in his choice of words. For him, every word was chosen based on its ability to communicate meaning, carry philosophical weight, and retain aesthetic grace, without indulging in excessive literary flourish.

Dr. Manoj Kurur, in *Śrīnārāyaṇaguru: Kavithayuṃ Saundaryashāstravuṃ* mentions that whether it is in Malayalam or in its most refined native form, the language of Sree Narayana Guru stands distinctly apart from the diction of the Veṇmaṇi school that dominated the literary scene of the time. Guru's language is a beautifully merged flow of Tamil and Malayalam — a shared vocabulary that glows with devotional and philosophical intensity.

Take, for instance, these striking forms of address (sambōdhana), which appear as poetic openings:

അരുളേ, തിരുമേനിയണഞ്ഞിടുമീ-
യിരുളേ, വെളിയേയിടയേ പൊതുവേ!
കരളേ കരളിങ്കലിരിക്കുമരും-
പൊരുളേ പുരി മൂന്നുമെരിച്ചവനേ!

Oh, God when your come

This darkness, brightness,
intermediary in all
Beloved the must pleased
to rest in the mind
Oh, God he who burned the three
cities (Trans; Muttath Sudha)

In certain instances, Sanskrit also blends seamlessly with this mixed Tamil-Malayalam diction:

പുതുമാങ്കനി പുത്തമൃതേ, ഗുളമേ,
മധുവേ, മധുരക്കനിയേ, രസമേ,
വിധിമാധവരാദി തിരഞ്ഞിടുമെൻ
പതിയേ, പദപങ്കജമേ, ഗതിയേ!

(Cijjada Cintanam)

The new whispering mango fruit
The new nectar jaggery
Honey, sweet fruit, juice
My husband as destiny
Your flowerlike feet determines my
journey.

(Trans. Muttath Sudha)

Through these layered invocations — that move across names, forms, and symbolic expressions — Guru often reveals an all-pervading paraṃporuḷ (transcendent essence) that shines through all manifestations yet transcends them.

See, for example:

അരുളേ നിൻകളിയരുളാ-
ലരുളിടുന്നീയെനിക്കൊരരുമറയേ!
ഇരുളേ! വെളിയേ! നടുവാ-
മരുളേ കരളിൽ കളിക്കുമൊരു പൊരുളേ!

Muni Narayana Prasad's translation of swanubhava geethi is durable as 'song of self expence' kindly give true translation of the the line in bracket.Or another verse:

പുകയേ! പൊടിയേ! പുറമേ
യകമേ വെളിയേ! നിറഞ്ഞ പുതുമഴയേ!
ഇഹമേ! പരമേ ഇടയേ
സുഖമേകണമേ കനിഞ്ഞു നിയകമേ

(Svānubhava Gīti)

Guru creates a veritable moḻipeṟukkam (unfolding profusion of language) where inner and outer meanings merge. His words are not mere labels — they are philosophical signposts, poetically formed and functionally rich.

For instance, many of Guru's words take on distinct meanings within his spiritual and poetic universe. The word poruḷ (പൊരുള്) denotes meaning, absolute truth, and foundation depending on the context. Similarly, the Tamil-derived word iṉpam (ഇമ്പം), which usually means 'sweetness', is used by Guru in the sense of sukham (happiness or bliss).

In Tamil, the puruṣārthas — dharma, artha, kāma, and mokṣa — are translated as aram, poruḷ, iṉpam, and vīṭu respectively. Guru's familiarity with these meanings enriches his poetic diction with layered cultural significance.

For example, in Subrahmaṇya Kīrtanam:

എച്ചിൽച്ചോറുണ്ടപുള്ളിക്കിനിയൊരു മകനാം
നീയിരപ്പാളി, ഞാനോ
പിച്ചക്കാരൻ, പിഴയ്ക്കും പിഴകളഖിലവും
നീ പൊറുക്കെന്നു ഞായം;

"You are the son of one
Who was eating the crimb
And as son you have a habit of a real
beggar;
And who am I? You have only son
A vegab and; the flyng hairs ate gone
I may commit wrongs
But you may excuse all my writings
That is proper; that is all heaven
allows."

(Trans. Muttath Sudha)

Here, the bhakta is the beggar, and the deity is the one who grants irappāḷi (alms). Beneath the surface humour lies a powerful allusion to Tamil Śaiva-Vaiṣṇava bhakti traditions, where devotees consider themselves as humble servants (aṭiyār or toṇṭar).

Words such as karu and uru are used to denote 'body' in the sense of śarīraṃ, linking to metaphysical interpretations where consciousness (vastu-svarūpaṃ) is expressed through form.

In one instance:

അറിവാം കരുവാൻ ചെയ്ത
കരുവാണിനമോർക്കുകിൽ

(Jāti Lakṣaṇam)

The blacksmith, being aware of
To make the mould of the species;

When thought of…. (Trans. Muttath Sudha)Here, knowledge (aṟivu) is the karuvāṉ (creator), and the karuvāṇi (creation) is that which must be remembered. The poet does not use the word jāti (caste) to suggest hierarchical identity but to explore essential nature — an unquantifiable quality.

Such usage indicates that Guru was less interested in outer forms and more focused on nishpatthi-parama (absolute truths). The poetic metaphor unfolds into dṛṣṭānta — an illustrative lens into his darśanam (philosophy).

2.1.10 Self-Discipline, Poetic Culture and Inner Transformation

In the article Vākkum Vaktāvum: Śrīnārāyaṇa Racanaḷile Kāvyānubhavam, the author states: What forms do self-discipline (ātmānuśīlanam) and poetic experience assume in the writings of Sree Narayana Guru? From which position do we engage with these practices and experiences? Self-discipline and attention (śraddha) are inherently inward activities (ātmāpravṛtti). They are techniques of transformation that demand self-performed rituals intended to reshape the self. Poetic culture (kāvyasaṃskāraṃ) arises from such a mode of inner engagement.

Like other forms of technical or artistic training, some may see poetic practice as a tool to master an external art form and to perform it successfully. However, when we speak of poetic culture in the context of Guru's work, we usually do not refer to such external mastery. Instead, poetic writing and appreciation are seen as processes that fundamentally transform the practitioner.

This internal transformation — the reconstitution of the self — is often at the heart of what we describe as the role of the sahṛdaya (empathetic reader or listener) in literary aesthetics. This inward poetic practice may also intersect with other forms of self-discipline and spiritual training. While the answer to how this connection operates may differ from poet to poet, it is not a matter of individual choice alone. What literature exchanges with the wider field of life and its evolution over time are deeply intertwined with these practices.

Guru was a unique poet-mystic, distinct from conventional categories. Viṣṇunarāyaṇan Nampūtiri noted he was the first in Malayalam history to compose poetry "driven by intense inner restlessness (antaracōdaṇa) and rooted in tapas (austerity)." His poetic practice and tapas are best understood as inner action (ātmāpravṛtti), transcending limited theological views. Language is integral to tapas, sometimes involving a rejection of expression. Spirituality, an experiential field, resists easy codification. Guru's recurring retreat from worldly actions aims to relinquish the sense of an agent (kartṛbhāvaṃ).

The interplay of action (pravṛtti) and renunciation (nivṛtti) lacks fixed rules, dependent on the individual. Guru famously addressed agency,

stating: "Action exists, but there is no one who does it" (pravṛtti uṇṭu, ārillya). This "action without an agent" concept profoundly challenges modern thought's focus on autonomous agency, making Guru's philosophy uniquely provocative despite its reverence.

2.1.11 Word as an Ethical and Philosophical Choice

In Sree Narayana Guru's poetry, word selection is not merely a poetic decision but an ethical and philosophical choice. Every term is weighed for its clarity, relevance, musicality, and power to convey lasting truths.

Guru's diction reflects his belief that true poetry must speak to everyone—not just the learned but the common man. Whether he draws from the Vedic past or colonial modernity, his words remain rooted in human experience, compassion, and universal wisdom.

Through this carefully crafted selection of words, Guru ensures that his poetry endures across time, offering not just literary beauty but guidance, reflection, and spiritual awakening. His word choices, rich in simplicity and depth, continue to shape social thought and ethical discourse in Kerala and beyond.

2.1.12 Integration of Sound, Rhythm, and Meaning

One of the defining features of Sree Narayana Guru's poetry is his masterful integration of sound, rhythm, and meaning. For Guru, poetry was not just a sequence of words but a harmonious blend of sonic beauty and philosophical depth. His command over various Sanskrit and Dravidian metres (Chandas) allowed him to create compositions that were both musically resonant and intellectually profound.

Guru viewed rhythm not merely as a decorative feature but as a spiritual device—a means to help the reader or listener enter into a meditative state where philosophical absorption could take place. The flow of sound, the cadence of syllables, and the precision of rhythmic patterns work together to create poetry that touches both the mind and the soul.

Dr. Manoj Kurur, in the article: *Śrīnārāyaṇaguru: Kavithayuṃ Saundaryashāstravuṃ* observes: In the poetry of Sree Narayana Guru, it is common to see words move like dance — or flow like ripples in a stream. This dynamic, almost kinetic quality is not an ornament but a natural part of the poetic structure.

ആഴിയും തിരയും കാറ്റും-
ആഴവും പോലെ ഞങ്ങളും

(Daivadaśakam)

നങ്കും മങ്കും നടിച്ചും

(Subrahmaṇya Kīrtanam)

Like the ocean, wave, wind
And depth, the calm and serene
Bottom of the colourful ocean
Similar to our mind

(Trans. Muttath Sudha)

കാടും വീടും സമം നിന്തിരുവടിയരുൾപൊ-
ങ്ങീടുവോളം പൊറുപ്പാൻ
നാടുണ്ടോടുണ്ടു ചോറുണ്ടരിയ തിരുവെഴു-
ത്താറുമുണ്ടോതുവാനും

(Subrahmaṇya Kīrtanam)

Pretending shy, joy of my life
Whether the forest and the home are dentical
Till your words are raised so as to excuse
There is village, bowl, and rise there in
And sacred six letters to recite

(Trans. Muttath Sudha)

These lines demonstrate how language

becomes embodied and animated, how Guru's words build a living rhythm that flows through the voice and body.

Phrases like āvivaṇ tōṇi (Daivadaśakam), chantaccenthīmizhi ccengathirnira, pāthippeṇmeymakan (Subrahmaṇya Kīrtanam) are original word fusions (moḻiccerppu), organically crafted, and they act as unique poetic elements that distinguish Guru's work.

Other linguistic features also contribute to this poetic energy. In Subrahmaṇya Kīrtanam, we find colloquial expressions such as:

അന്തിപ്പൂന്തിങ്കളുന്തി

The moon like the beautiful saffron in the dusk

Here, unti is used to suggest "spit out" or "project outward," resulting in a three-dimensional verbal aesthetic.

Examples such as:

മുടറ്റിടും മുൻ (Subrahmaṇya Kīrtanam)

Before I collapse

കള്ളം കണ്ടുപിടിച്ചാ-
ലുള്ളം കൈകണ്ട നെല്ലിതൻ കനിയാം
(Svānubhava Gīti)

"kaḷḷaṁ kaṇṭupiṭiccāluḷḷaṁ kaikanda nellitan kaniyām" demonstrate Guru's clever integration of local dialect and folk speech into elevated poetic diction.

Similarly, in Śivaśatakam:

മുടിനടുവാദി മുടിഞ്ഞു മൂന്നുമൊന്നായ്
വടിവൊടുനിന്നു വിളങ്ങിടും വിളക്കിൻ
ചുടരൊളി ചുട്ടു തുടച്ചു ശോകമാകും
കടലതുകൊടു കടന്നിടുന്നു കൂലം

In Sadāśiva Darśanam:

അടിക്കു പന്നി പോയി നിന്മുടിക്കൊരന്നവും
പറന്നടുത്തു കണ്ടതില്ല നിന്നെയിന്നുമഗ്
നിശൈലമേ!

The pigs went away, no beautiful
coming by flying or swmming nearby
(Trans. Muttathu Sudha)

And in Śivaśatakam again:

ഒഴുകിവരുന്നമൃതുണ്ടുമാണ്ടുപോകാ-
തൊഴുവിലൊടുക്കമുദിക്കുമർക്കബിംബം.

In the ultimate end
Arises the idol of the sun.

— all these show linguistic constructions that collapse inner and outer, material and metaphysical, body and consciousness into single poetic expressions.

Guru's metaphorical reach also includes carnal and worldly motifs, used to signify spiritual detachment. For instance, in Śivaśatakam:

കടിയിടയിങ്കലൊളിച്ചിരുന്നു കൂടും
പൊടിയിലുരുണ്ടു വിരണ്ടു പോക്കടിപ്പാൻ

A life of sensual indulgence
Always with women, will lead you to the dust
The passion driven ruin overtaking you.

These lines describe the fading of rāgaguṇa (passion-driven emotions) and sensual indulgence (kāmavāsana) through powerful visual metaphors. Here, he reworks the language of everyday life into a unique poetic idiom.

Guru consistently prioritises holistic poetic experiences over ornamental imagination. Still, he frequently uses metaphor and simile to render abstract ideas tangible.

For example, as in:

ആനന്ദക്കടൽ പൊങ്ങി-
ത്താനേ പായുന്നിതാ പരന്നൊരു പോൽ,
ജ്ഞാനംകൊണ്ടിതിലേറി-
പ്പാനം ചെയ്യുന്നു പരമഹംസജനം.
(Svānubhava Gīti)

The ocean of bliss has begun to rise,
Flowing wide beneath the skies.
With the sail of wisdom raised on high,
The paramahamsas drink it dry.

Sometimes, the experience is likened to the radiance of a crore suns rising together:

ഒരുകോടി ദിവാകരരൊത്തുയരും
പടി പാരൊടു നീരനലാദികളും
കെടുമാറു കിളർന്നു വരുന്നൊരു നിൻ
വടിവെന്നുമിരുന്നു വിളങ്ങിടണം
(Cijjada Cintanam)

Like the simultaneous rising up of
Myriad of suns atance
Along with the eclipsing earth
Water, fire and so on
Would put off and memantoarily rising up
In the advdent of thespring
In the grace of her approach
In you shape you may shine
(Trans:Mutath Sudha)

Guru's poems also include aesthetically rich compositions that embody cosmic beauty and inner illumination, such as Jananīnavaratnamañjari:

മേലായ മൂലമതിയാലാവൃതം ജനനി!
നീ ലാസ്യമാടിവിടുമീ
കീലാലവായ്വനലകോലാഹലം ഭുവന-
മാലാപമാത്രമഖിലം;
കാലാദിയായ മൃദുനൂലാലെ നെയ്യുമൊരു
ലീലാപടം ഭവതിമെയ്-
മേലാകെ മൂടുമതിനാലാരുമുള്ളതറി-
വീലാഗമാന്തനിലയേ!

O mother, enveloped by the supreme primal intelegence!

The tumultuous world of water, air and fire that yielc cfreast through your divine dance (lasya) is but menenomenclature

With delicate threads of time and other
Elements, you weave the elegent
cloths,
Veiling your entire form, making it
Unrecognizable
Thus, no one realises the true reality
O abode of the Upaniṣadic wisdom
(Trans: Nataraja Guru)

The metrical scheme (vṛtta) here is Mattēbham, whose rhythm lends the verse a sense of lilting grace.

2.1.13 Use of Classical Metres (Chandas) with Purpose

Guru's poetry reflects his deep understanding of Sanskrit and indigenous metrical traditions. He employs a wide variety of Chandas, adapting each one skillfully to suit the content, theme, and emotional tone of the poem.

Among the metres Guru utilized were:

- Anushtup (8 syllables per line) – commonly used in his philosophical works like Darshanamala and Deivadasakam, where simplicity and clarity were essential.
- Shardula Vikridita (19 syllables per line) – known for its grandeur and depth, used in works like Bhadrakaliyashtakam and Sreekrishna darsanam, perfectly suited to express majesty and divine power.
- Vasantatilakam, Mayuralalitam, Atishakvari, and others—each chosen based on the specific bhava (emotion) and the gravity of the subject.

For instance, in *Chidambaramashtakam*, Guru employs Jagati Chandas (12 syllables) that adds a sense of stately rhythm, perfectly complementing the theme of cosmic creation and destruction:

"Brahmamukhamara Vandita Lingam
Janma Janmanta Bhava Linga..."

Here, the measured rhythm of Jagati supports the philosophical weight of

the lines describing the eternal nature of Brahman.

2.1.14 Sound Patterns and Meditative Flow

Guru's sound design was not accidental. He crafted his sound patterns to enhance the meditative quality of his verses, enabling readers or listeners to internalize complex philosophical ideas.

For example, in his "Sadashiva Darshanam," Guru uses Panchachamaram metre, where the rhythm evokes a calm, flowing movement, reflecting the serene and compassionate nature of Lord Shiva. The repetitive rhythmic pattern supports meditative chanting:

"Sivam Sivam Sivam Bhava Bhaya Haram"

The recurring sound and cadence deepen concentration, allowing the devotee to absorb the essence of Shivam—the auspicious, peaceful state of being.

Balancing Rhythm and Meaning

Guru's ability to maintain philosophical meaning without sacrificing rhythmic beauty is evident in his Pindanandi poem. Composed in Vasantatilakam metre, the poem explores the duality of materialism and spirituality. The smooth, even beat of the metre balances the philosophical conflict it describes:

"Bhoga Vairagyam Pindanandi Tattvam..."

Here, the rhythm supports the reflective mood of the poem, guiding the reader gently through contemplation of worldly pleasures versus spiritual pursuits.

Similarly, in "Srivaasudeva Ashtakam," the use of Shardula Vikridita imparts a majestic flow:

"Srivaasudeva Saraseeruha Panchajanya..."

The grandeur of the metre reinforces the divine magnificence of Vasudeva, creating a soundscape that is both regal and devotional.

2.1.15 Innovative Rhythm in Devotional Works

In his devotional poetry, Guru further showcases his metrical versatility. His "Kundalini Pattu," set in the Dravidian Manjari metre, resembles a lullaby or yogic chant, reflecting the soothing flow of Kundalini energy. The rhythmic pattern aligns with the theme of spiritual ascent and eternal well-being.

Likewise, in "Navamanjari" and "Jananinava Ratnamanjari," Guru uses complex syllabic cycles to create rhythmic layers that mirror the abundance and prosperity symbolised by the goddess:

"Navarathna Mani Malika Shobha…"

Each line cascades like a stream of pearls, where rhythm enhances the richness and beauty of meaning.

Sree Narayana Guru's poetry exemplifies how sound, rhythm, and meaning can exist in perfect harmony. Every metre he chose, every syllabic pattern he crafted, was meticulously aligned with the philosophical or devotional content of his works.

His poetry is meant not only to be read but also to be recited, chanted, and internalized. The musicality serves a higher purpose—to deepen concentration, evoke reflection, and guide the seeker inward. By balancing sound with substance, Guru ensured that his poetry transcended mere aesthetics, becoming a spiritual and philosophical experience—one where the ear, the mind, and the soul converge.

2.1.16 Metaphoric and Symbolic Diction

Among the many defining features of Sree Narayana Guru's poetic diction, his masterful use of metaphor and symbolism stands out as a hallmark of both his literary skill and philosophical depth. Guru's poetry is replete with carefully chosen symbols and images that carry multi-layered meanings—enriching the aesthetic beauty of the verses while conveying complex spiritual, ethical, and social messages.

For Guru, metaphors were not ornamental devices; they were philosophical instruments. Each image he chose served a purpose—to bridge the seen and the unseen, the material and the spiritual, and the temporal and the eternal. Through his symbolic diction, Guru invited readers to reflect deeply on life's fundamental questions while enjoying the poetic flow of his language.

2.1.17 The Senses, the Body, and the Symbolism of Numbers in Guru's Poetic Vision

In the article:"Śrīnārāyaṇaguru: Kavithayuṃ Saundaryashāstravuṃ," Dr. Manoj Kurur states that in many of Sree Narayana Guru's works, the five senses (pañcēndriyaṅṅaḷ) are conceptualised through various metaphors. In Ātmōpadēśaśatakam, for instance, the senses are described as birds, and sensory experiences as fruits they consume:

ഒളിമുതലാം പഴമഞ്ചുമുണ്ടു നാറും
നളികയിലേറി നയേന മാറിയാടും
കിളികളെയഞ്ചുമരിഞ്ഞു കീഴ്മറിക്കും
വെളിവുരുവേന്തിയകം വിളങ്ങീടേണം.

The five ancient lights, beginning with radiance, arise and fade,
Climbing the subtle channel, they gracefully shift and play.
Knowing well the five sense-birds,
they are drawn within and stilled —
Then, with form of light assumed, the Self must shine forth bright.

Here, Guru urges that the form of reality (veḷivuruvam) must shine forth beyond the tricks and turns of the five birds (senses), who scramble for fruit in the hollowed-out tube of perception.

In Piṇḍānandiyil, the senses are likened to doors:

അന്നുള്ള വേദന മറന്നതു നന്നുണർന്നാ-
ലിന്നിങ്ങു തന്നെരിയിൽ വീണു മരിക്കുമയ്യോ!
പൊന്നപ്പനന്നു പൊറിവാതിലൊരഞ്ചുമിട്ടു
തന്നിട്ടു തന്നെയിതുമിന്നറിയുന്നു ശംഭോ!

It is all the better that I forget the pain them felt
If awake I may die by falling
In the flames of the burning fire
Then my beloved papa, you have provided
Five small otulets for ingress and egress
The dark door of the secret earth
How vulgar? What a mean act
Oh Shiva, now I am aware of this bliss

The golden father (ponnappan) here is the Lord who constructed five little doors (the senses) through which the child (the embodied self) accesses the world.

In Indriyavairāgyam, Guru calls the senses pulayar — a usage that requires contextual understanding:

അയ്യോ! കിടന്നലയുമിപ്പുലയർക്കു നീയെൻ-
മെയ്യോ കൊടുത്തു വിലയായ് വിലസുന്നു മേലിൽ
കയ്യൊന്നു തന്നു കരയേറ്റണമെന്നെയിന്നീ-
പ്പൊയ്യിങ്കൽനിന്നു പുതുമേനി പുണർന്നിടാനായ്.

Oh Shiva, what pity!
To the so-called untouchables,
struggling in trembling waters,
As if in a boat without oars in the rough sea.

You gave me this body in exchange for a price,
And since then, I have merely shone on the surface.
In the time to come, extend Your hand-
That I may be lifted up toward true elevation,
From this false appearance,
Where neglect and ill will have become permanent.
Let me embrace Your newly awakened form,
With breasts as tender as Your divine compassion.
Indeed, this is a sheer blessing in disguise.
(Trans. Muttath Sudha)

The word pulayar here does not refer to a caste. Commentators clarify that in this context, it suggests those who are defiled by lower passions (poṟi — impurity, filth). This usage aligns with Guru's critique of sensory slavery.

In Madanapulayan (from Mananātītam), Guru uses the image of a sensual hunter (pulayan) to personify the overpowering desire (kāma). Again, it is a metaphoric evocation — not a social classification.

Guru uses such metaphors, not to reinforce distinctions, but to dissolve ego and promote inner clarity.

Elsewhere, in Subrahmaṇya Kīrtanam:

എൺ ചാൺറോട്ടൂടെയുള്ളശ്ശകടമതു വലി-
ച്ചോണ്ടു മേലീഴ്ത്തുകീഴും
സഞ്ചാരം താവി മേവും തുരഗമിണയൊടേ
പൂട്ടിയോടിച്ചിറങ്ങി
അഞ്ചാറെട്ടും കടന്നായരമനയകമേ-
റിസ്സുഖിച്ചങ്ങിരുന്നെൻ -
നെഞ്ചാറിപ്പാൽ കുടിപ്പനൊരുവരമരുളീ-
ടേണമേ തമ്പുരാനേ!

To ride this chariot,
Going up and down along the wide road,
Drawn by twin horses in motion —
This chariot made for the journey.
And after entering the palace,
You sit in enjoyment.
But my heart remains ever restless.
O Lord, grant me the boon —
To drink the milk from the divine breast. (Trans. Muttath Sudha)

Here, the "eight chāṇ long inner road" and the "chariot" become metaphors for the human body and spiritual journey, illustrating Guru's mastery of poetic allegory. This is likened to the "vehicle of life" moving along a sacred interior path — an exquisite example of symbolic transfiguration.

Elsewhere, Guru draws from everyday technological and urban imagery:

റെയ്‌ലിൻ വേഗം ജയിക്കും ജരനര മുതലാം
മൂഢരും ഞാനുമായി-
ജ്ജയ്‌ലിൽ പാർപ്പാൻ ഞെരുക്കം ജവമയി!
പരമൻ
ചിത്സുഖം നല്കിടേണം.

Oh child, who dances upon the never-fading truth,
Oh lamp that lights my silent home,
Surpassing even the speed of rushing trains—
I, along with fools, remain confined in this prison,
With wrinkled face and greying hair.
O sudden One, grant me the joy of true peace!

Here, metaphors like "Railine speed" and "jail" illustrate the pressures of modern life and existential captivity.

In Śivaśatakam:

മലയതിലുണ്ടു മരുന്നു മൂന്നു പാമ്പും
പുലിയുമതിന്നിരുപാടുമുണ്ടു കാവൽ
പുലയനെടുത്തു ഭുജിച്ചു പാതിയിന്നും
വിലസതി നീയുമെടുത്തുകൊൾക നെഞ്ചേ!

On this hil rich with medicinal herbs,
Rguarded in either sides
By three cobrae and tiger;
The untouchable ate half the meal as usual
Enjoy the remains, my heart, happy as even

When a disciple asked about this stanza,

Guru simply said, "It was composed at Maruthwāmala for the welfare of the world."

Interpretations abound — the mountain suggests healing; the medicines may refer to yogic processes or social remedies; the puli (tiger) and pāmpu (snake) suggest fearsome obstacles, and the pulayan is again the symbolic seeker who dares to taste.

Similarly, see tha following lines in Ātmōpadēśaśatakam:

ഇരുപുറവും വരുമാറവസ്ഥയെപ്പൂ-
ത്തൊരു കൊടിവന്നു പടർന്നുയർന്നു മേവും
തരുവിനടിക്കു തപസ്സുചെയ്തു വാഴും
നരനു വരാ നരകം നിനച്ചിടേണം.

Let man reflect well upon the hell that shall not come
To one who, renouncing both ends of dual becoming,
Plants the firm flag of unity, rising aloft and spreading wide,
Dwells beneath the sacred tree,
devoted to inner discipline and contemplative life.

This stanza has been interpreted in various ways:

Yogic Reading: The taru (tree) is the suṣumnā nāḍī (central channel), and the two "sides" are the iḍā and piṅgalā nāḍīs. The six states represent yogic chakras.

Cosmic Tree View: The tree is the universe; the two sides are creation and destruction. The creeper (koṭi) is māyā climbing upward.

Vedic Perspective: The tree is the Veda; the two divisions are karma kāṇḍa and jñāna kāṇḍa, and the six limbs are śikṣā, vyākaraṇa, chandas, nirukta, jyotiṣa, and kalpa.

Guru's poetry thus overflows with metaphor, number, rhythm, and philosophical depth, all embedded within a remarkably accessible poetic structure.

Guru's poetic diction was deliberately designed to function as an instrument of social change. By employing clear, rhythmic, and relatable language, he dismantled the barriers that kept philosophy and ethics confined to elite circles.

For example, in his "Jati Lakshanam," Guru writes:

"Ask not of birth, but inquire of behavior,
Those of noble deeds alone are noble."

പേരൂരു തൊഴിലീ മൂന്നും
പോരുമായതു കേൾക്കുക!
ആരു നീയെന്നു കേൾക്കേണ്ട
നേരു മെയ്തന്നെ ചൊല്കയാൽ

This line directly attacks caste-based discrimination, asserting that nobility is defined not by birth but by profession and character and the noble deeds one has done. The simplicity of the phrasing makes it universally understandable and easily transmittable—allowing even the unlettered masses to grasp and repeat the message.

Such diction worked not merely as poetry but as a slogan, a mantra for social reform. It became a catalyst in Kerala's progressive movements, influencing later thinkers, activists, and political leaders.

2.1.18 Spiritual Depth within Social Discourse

Despite the overt social relevance, Guru never compromised on the spiritual foundation of his diction. Every socially charged verse carries within it a layered spiritual meaning, elevating the political message into a universal human ideal.

His verse:

"whichever the religion, it suffices
If it makes a better man."

may appear as a simple ethical statement, but it embodies a profound Vedantic truth—that Dharma (righteousness) transcends religious boundaries and that goodness is the ultimate measure of humanity.

Here, the universalizing diction allows the verse to function across religious, regional, and temporal lines, making it relevant not just to the Kerala of Guru's times but across the whole world, even today.

2.1.19 Poetic Diction as a Basic Component of Poetry

Sree Narayana Guru's poetic diction stands as a monumental example of how language, when used with philosophical vision, becomes a force of spiritual and social transformation. His mastery over words—chosen for clarity, depth, and musicality—transformed poetry into a tool of awakening, equality, and ethical living.

Guru's diction:

- Embodies classical poetics, reflecting the richness of Dhvani and Vakrokti theories.
- Aligns with Bhakti traditions, making philosophy emotionally resonant and accessible.
- Echoes Upaniṣadic brevity, condensing vast truths into a few simple words.
- Embraces modernity, integrating contemporary images that ground timeless ideas in the real world.

What emerges is a poetic voice that is uniquely Guru's—calm, profound, compassionate, and revolutionary. His words transcend caste, creed, and time, offering universal principles of oneness, compassion, and ethical life. In Guru's hands, poetic diction is not merely a literary tool but a sacred instrument of vision and action. Every word chosen reflects the seer's wisdom, every metaphor points to a spiritual truth, and every phrase carries the power to reform society and elevate the individual soul. His poetry continues to inspire, proving an insight that true poetic diction is not about complexity or ornamentation, but about the enduring ability of simple words to reveal the eternal.

Recap

- Poetic diction elevates language beyond utilitarian functions
- Sree Narayana Guru's poetic diction blends simplicity with profound meaning

- Guru's poetry is characterized by spiritual and social transformation
- Philosophical insights are conveyed through simple and accessible language
- Symbolism and metaphor play a key role in Guru's diction
- Sound and rhythm enhance the meditative quality of Guru's poetry
- Poetic diction serves as a medium for social critique and reform
- Guru's works employ diverse metrical patterns for thematic depth
- Metaphors like oceans and waves reflect Advaita philosophy
- Simplicity in expression ensures the accessibility of complex ideas
- Symbols from nature connect physical reality with spiritual truths
- Diction often combines Tamil and Malayalam influences
- Philosophical ideas are embedded in everyday language
- Modern metaphors reflect social realities and human struggles
- Guru's poetic diction transcends religious and caste barriers
- Language is treated as a tool for spiritual and social awakening
- Rhythmic patterns are crafted to facilitate contemplation
- Poetic simplicity is achieved without sacrificing philosophical depth
- Symbolic language encourages reflection on human equality
- The use of rhythmic chanting enhances devotional expression
- Simple phrases encapsulate vast philosophical meanings
- Guru's diction blends classical poetics with modern sensibilities
- Diction as a unifying force promotes human solidarity
- Metaphorical expressions reveal the transient nature of life
- Guru's use of sound, rhythm, and diction creates holistic poetic experiences

Objective Questions

1. What is the essence of poetry according to Sree Narayana Guru?
2. What does poetic diction transform ordinary language into?
3. Which language combination does Guru frequently use in his poetic diction?
4. What does poetic diction convey apart from meaning?
5. What is the rhythmic and aesthetic aspect of poetic diction called?
6. What philosophical thought is predominant in Guru's poetic diction?
7. What is the primary purpose of poetic diction in Guru's works?
8. What kind of experiences does poetic diction elevate language to?
9. Which literary figure is associated with simple and profound poetic diction?
10. What quality makes poetic diction powerful in conveying truths?

Answers

1. Diction
2. Poetry
3. Manipravalam
4. Emotion
5. Sound
6. Advaita
7. Transformation
8. Aesthetic
9. Guru
10. Simplicity

Assignments

1. Discuss the significance of poetic diction in Sree Narayana Guru's poetry.
2. How does poetic diction enhance the spiritual depth of Guru's works?
3. Analyze the role of rhythm in conveying philosophical ideas in Guru's poetry.
4. What makes Guru's poetic diction accessible yet profound?
5. Examine how Guru's diction reflects a blend of classical and modern influences.

SGOU

The Trilingual Scholarship of Sree Narayana Guru

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- understand the importance of trilingual proficiency in Guru's literary and philosophical output
- recognise how language functions as a tool of empowerment, reform, and universality in Guru's works
- appreciate Guru's role in breaking social hierarchies through language and fostering cultural inclusivity
- analyse the stylistic and thematic features of Guru's writings in Malayalam, Sanskrit, and Tamil within their socio-historical contexts

Prerequisites

One of the most significant and unique aspects of Sree Narayana Guru's literary and philosophical genius was his remarkable multilingual proficiency. Guru's mastery over Malayalam, Sanskrit, and Tamil enabled him to transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries, allowing his ideas of spiritual unity, social equality, and philosophical depth to reach diverse audiences.

This trilingual ability was not merely linguistic but reflected Guru's deep engagement with the intellectual, spiritual, and social traditions embedded in these languages. His scholarship in all three was equally profound, as he used each language strategically based on the message, audience, and context of his writings.

Key themes

Trilingualism, Scholarship, Social Reform, Philosophy, Linguistic Diversity, Cultural Inclusivity, Poetic Diction

Discussion

2.2.1 Guru's Multilingual Proficiency: An Overview

In the article: "Jīvakāruṇya Pañcakam': Oru Paṭhanaṃ, Dr. Āśālatā mentions that Sree Narayana Guru paid close attention to the linguistic features expressed through his works. His conviction was that "when writing in Malayalam, it must remain truly Malayalam." At the time, most writers employed a Sanskrit-heavy style, using numerous vibhakti-antya Sanskrit words with ease. However, Guru did not take an extremist stance of rejecting all Sanskrit terms outright. Instead, he followed a balanced linguistic policy — using Sanskrit words where necessary to express meaning without compromising clarity or fluency (T. Bhāskaran, 2003). This approach shaped a poetic diction that was both authentic and functional, where vocabulary was never decorative but always expressive and purposeful.

In the article, "Vāṅmaya Gaṅgā Pravāham" Sajaay K.V. views that Sree Narayana Guru is a rare personality who appears as a Vedantin in poetic discussions and as a poet in Vedantic debates. One cannot arrive at the true essence of his poetry without journeying through the formidable paths of Vedanta. Many who attempted this have either set aside the poetic aspect, seeing only the philosophy, or failed to grasp the depth of his unique blend of poetry and Vedanta.

One effective remedy is to approach Guru the poet through the lens of his language. Yet, even this path has its challenges. Guru employed three languages in his poetic compositions — Malayalam, Tamil, and Sanskrit. He wrote in pure Sanskrit and in Tamil, while in many works, a fusion of the three languages is found.

One might argue that Guru's poetic language is refined Malayalam deeply influenced by Tamil. But works like Bhadrakālyaṣṭakam, written entirely in Sanskrit, challenge such claims. Nevertheless, we may still say that no other poet in the late 19th or early 20th century has mixed Tamil into Malayalam poetic diction as extensively as Guru. Thus, his linguistic personality is multifaceted and vivid, embodying a rare poetic cosmopolitanism.

2.2.1.1 Malayalam – The Language of the People and Social Reform

As a native speaker of Malayalam, Sree Narayana Guru's earliest exposure to literature, folklore, and spiritual teachings came through this language. Malayalam served as his primary medium for engaging with the masses, especially in Kerala, where social reform and community empowerment were his central concerns.

Guru used Malayalam to address social inequalities, caste oppression, superstitions, and ethical degeneration. Through his simple, clear, and poetic

Malayalam diction, Guru communicated complex philosophical ideas in ways that were accessible to ordinary people.

His famous declarations, such as:

"One caste, one religion, one God for mankind."

were delivered in Malayalam, ensuring they resonated deeply and widely with the people of Kerala.

Major Malayalam works include:

- Advaita Deepika
- Arivu
- Atmopadesa Śatakam
- Daivadasakam, etc.

In these, Guru combined plain speech with profound thought, reflecting his commitment to social reform and moral regeneration.

2.2.1.2 Sanskrit – The Language of Philosophy, Universality, and Classical Learning

Guru's knowledge of Sanskrit was exceptional and self-acquired, breaking the barriers of caste-based restrictions that traditionally denied Sanskrit education to non-Brahmins. Through Sanskrit, Guru connected directly with India's philosophical and spiritual heritage, including the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Vedanta, and classical poetry.

His Sanskrit works are noted for their philosophical precision, poetic beauty, and technical mastery of metre and style.

Guru composed:

- Atmopadesa Śatakam (though in Malayalam, heavily influenced by Sanskrit philosophy)
- Darsanamala (Garland of Philosophical Visions)
- Bhadrakaliyashtakam, Sivapanchakam, Jnanapanchakam, Siva Satakam, Vishnuashtakam, Vinayakashtakam, among others

These Sanskrit works reflect his deep command of classical philosophy and were intended to universalize his spiritual vision, placing his ideas within the larger Indian philosophical discourse. Sanskrit served as the language of universality, allowing Guru's thoughts to transcend regional boundaries and reach the pan-Indian intellectual tradition.

2.2.1.3 Tamil – The Language of Bhakti and Siddha Traditions

Guru's proficiency in Tamil opened a vital literary and spiritual connection to South Indian cultural traditions, especially the Tamil Siddha and Bhakti movements known for their anti-caste, anti-ritualistic, and egalitarian themes.

Tamil Bhakti poets like Appar, Sundarar, Manikkavacakar, and the Siddhars influenced Guru's thought, style, and use of symbols.

Through Tamil, Guru was able to:

- Engage with devotional poetry traditions
- Absorb the radical social critique embedded in Tamil Bhakti songs
- Extend his influence beyond Kerala into the Tamil-speaking regions of South India

Guru's engagement with Tamil is evident in Thevarapathigangal, in his

translation of Thirukkural and 'Oru Tamil Slokam'. Many of his plain speech, symbolic imagery, and spiritual egalitarianism, also mirror in the Siddha poetic tradition.

2.2.1.4 Linguistic Versatility as a Philosophical and Social Tool

Guru's trilingual mastery was not merely academic or artistic; it was deeply philosophical and political. By writing and philosophizing in three languages, he:

- Bridged caste and class divides—challenging the Sanskrit monopoly and democratizing knowledge
- Reached diverse audiences—from local villagers to learned scholars
- Ensured the wide dissemination of his spiritual and social ideals

His trilingualism reflects his vision of universality and inclusivity, ensuring that no language, caste, or community was excluded from accessing the light of knowledge.

P.N. Gōpīkṛṣṇan expresses his views on Guru: The term "modernity" in this context does not refer merely to a historical phase marked by literary or intellectual renewal but to an ongoing cultural process that continually reshapes social life and relationships. This modern consciousness helped open up cultural traditions and languages, enabling Malayalam to continue as a lively medium for creative writing.

Sree Narayana Guru was a poet who earnestly tried to turn Malayalam into a dialogic, living language. He was able to position Malayalam face-to-face with Tamil and Sanskrit — two of India's great classical languages.

He was simultaneously a translator of Tirukkural and the Īśāvāsyōpaniṣad. The Tamil influence is evident in Kuṇḍalinippaṭṭu, just as the Sanskrit influence is explicit in Advaitadīpikā. However, under the heavily Sanskritic title Cijjada Cintanam, one finds a rare blend of Tamil and Sanskrit styles.

Municaryāpañcakam, said to be born from Guru's memory of visiting the Tamil sage Ramana Maharshi, is composed in polished Sanskrit, while Ātmōpadēśaśatakam avoids mystifying the term ātmā and instead attempts to render it into a physical, embodied expression.

Just as Daivadaśakam reimagines God, Ātmōpadēśaśatakam reimagines the Self. If ten verses were enough to rewrite God, a hundred were needed to rewrite Man — this is one of the profound poetic lessons Guru teaches us.

2.2.1.5 Language as an Instrument of Guru's Mission

Sree Narayana Guru's multilingual scholarship played a pivotal role in shaping his mission of social reform, spiritual enlightenment, and philosophical universality. His ability to operate seamlessly in Malayalam, Sanskrit, and Tamil gave his works:

- Depth of thought
- Aesthetic grace
- Wider cultural and philosophical appeal

Guru proved that language is not just a medium of expression but a powerful instrument of transformation. Through his trilingual writings, he broke barriers, built bridges, and left behind a legacy of unity, compassion, and intellectual vigor that continues to inspire scholars, poets, and reformers.

2.2.2 Sanskrit Scholarship: The Language of Philosophy and Universality

One of the most remarkable aspects of Sree Narayana Guru's intellectual and literary legacy is his profound scholarship in Sanskrit, a language that for centuries remained the preserve of the Brahminical elite in India. Guru's deep engagement with Sanskrit was not only an assertion of his philosophical stature but also a bold act of reclaiming access to classical wisdom for all sections of society, particularly those traditionally denied entry into the sacred domain of Vedic learning. His mastery over Sanskrit enabled him to engage directly with the vast corpus of Indian philosophical thought—Vedanta, Upaniṣads, Samkhya, Yoga, and classical poetics—placing him among the rare philosopher-poets who could interpret, internalize, and recreate these traditions in their purest form.

For Sree Narayana Guru, Sanskrit was not merely a literary medium but a philosophical tool through which he universalized his spiritual teachings. By composing profound works in Sanskrit, he made a conscious statement that enlightenment and knowledge were not the monopoly of any one caste, class, or community. Guru's Sanskrit compositions broke the conventional barriers and redefined the language as a vehicle of universal human wisdom rather than the preserve of the learned few. He did not approach Sanskrit simply as a scholar but as a seer who sought to recover its spiritual essence, free from ritualistic obscurity. Through Sanskrit, Guru directly addressed the eternal concerns of human existence—the nature of reality, the illusion of multiplicity, and the path to liberation.

Among his significant Sanskrit contributions, Darsanamala stands out as a philosophical masterpiece. It is a structured collection of one hundred verses, systematically unfolding ten stages of spiritual vision—from the illusory nature of the world to the ultimate realisation of the self as Brahman. In this work, Guru demonstrates not only philosophical precision but also lyrical beauty and structural mastery, aligning perfectly with the classical Sanskrit tradition. The verses are brief yet dense with meaning, each encapsulating an entire philosophical vision in a few lines. Guru skillfully employs metres such as Anushtup and Shardula Vikridita, ensuring that the rhythm of his poetry complements its metaphysical depth. The elegance of Darsanamala lies in its ability to traverse complex philosophical systems while retaining simplicity and grace, making it accessible to both scholars and earnest seekers.

Equally significant are his devotional Sanskrit compositions such as Bhadrakaliyashtakam, Sivapanchakam, and Jnanapanchakam. These hymns reveal Guru's deep understanding of Sanskrit prosody and his ability to weave philosophical insights into devotional frames. In Bhadrakaliyashtakam, for instance, the fierce form of the goddess is invoked with a sense of awe and reverence, while also subtly embedding the non-dualistic vision of the divine as both immanent and transcendent. The verses flow with rhythmic beauty, combining sonic richness with spiritual intensity. Similarly, Sivapanchakam and Jnanapanchakam reflect Guru's remarkable capacity to express intricate Vedantic concepts in a manner that is both poetic and philosophically exact.

What distinguishes Guru's Sanskrit poetry is his meticulous attention to linguistic precision and his commitment to philosophical clarity. Every word in his verses is carefully chosen, ensuring that the complex ideas of non-dualism, self-realisation, and liberation are communicated without ambiguity. His diction avoids the ornate excesses of classical kavya while retaining its aesthetic elegance, thus making his compositions uniquely contemplative and meditative. Guru achieves a delicate balance between brevity and depth, where even the simplest lines resonate with profound metaphysical significance.

Through his Sanskrit writings, Guru accomplished what few could in his time—he democratized the language of spiritual knowledge. By claiming his rightful place in the lineage of India's philosopher-poets, he shattered the notion that Sanskrit was the exclusive domain of Brahmins. His works stand as a testament to his conviction that the highest knowledge is not defined by birth or social status but by the sincerity of one's quest and the clarity of vision. In engaging Sanskrit, Guru aligned himself with the ancient rishis while simultaneously challenging the rigidities of the contemporary social order.

The universality of Guru's Sanskrit works ensured their influence extended far beyond Kerala, gaining recognition among scholars and seekers across India. His compositions are studied today not only as literary achievements but also as contributions to India's philosophical and spiritual thought. Through Sanskrit, Guru offered the world a vision of reality rooted in non-duality, where distinctions of caste, creed, and community dissolve in the realisation of the self's unity with the Absolute.

2.2.3 Malayalam: The Language of the People and Social Reform

Sree Narayana Guru's conscious use of Malayalam as his primary literary and philosophical medium remains one of the most significant aspects of his poetic and reformist legacy. As his native language, Malayalam offered Guru not only the natural ease of expression but also the most effective means to engage directly with the people of Kerala. It was through this language that he sought to articulate his vision of social equality, spiritual unity, and ethical living, speaking to both the learned and the common folk in a tongue they could understand, internalize, and act upon.

In a society deeply entrenched in caste hierarchies and rigid social divisions, Guru recognized the transformative potential of Malayalam. By choosing to express his ideas in the language of the people, he decisively rejected the exclusive use of Sanskrit, which had long been associated with ritualism, orthodoxy, and caste-based privilege. For Guru, Malayalam was not merely a regional language but a democratic tool—a vehicle to carry the light of knowledge into the homes and hearts of those marginalized by prevailing social structures.

Throughout his literary journey, Guru demonstrated an exceptional ability to use Malayalam with clarity and precision. His diction was marked by simplicity, but this simplicity was not the result of linguistic limitations. Instead, it was a conscious stylistic choice, aimed at ensuring that his philosophical insights, ethical principles, and calls for social reform reached the broadest possible audience. Guru was aware that profound truths need not be cloaked in ornate language; rather, their power lay in their accessibility and their ability to resonate with everyday human experience.

One of the most enduring expressions of Guru's philosophy, "One Caste, One Religion, One God for Mankind," was delivered in Malayalam. This phrase, simple in construction but vast in implication, became a revolutionary call that reverberated through Kerala's social fabric. It succinctly encapsulated his dream of a society where birth no longer determined one's worth and where the essential unity of all human beings was recognized and respected. That such a profound declaration could be made so effectively in a few words of common speech is a testament to Guru's mastery over the philosophical power of plain diction.

Malayalam was not merely the language through which Guru communicated his thoughts—it was the medium through which he shaped a collective social consciousness. His poems and philosophical verses in Malayalam tackled issues that were immediate and real for his audience: the oppressive caste system, the ills of untouchability, the meaning of true religion, and the ethical principles that should guide human life. He spoke directly to the people, offering them not abstract theories but concrete ideas and moral guidelines that could be applied in daily living.

Among his many works in Malayalam, texts like Jati Nirnayam stand out for their bold critique of caste-based discrimination. In this work, Guru challenges the very foundations of the caste system, asserting that human worth is not determined by birth but by behavior and character. The text resonates with his broader philosophical commitment to equality, fraternity, and justice. By writing it in Malayalam, Guru ensured that his arguments were not confined to academic circles but became part of the public discourse in Kerala.

Another noteworthy Malayalam composition, Anukampa Dasakam, reveals Guru's deep concern for compassion as a fundamental human virtue. In these verses, he extols kindness and empathy as the highest forms of worship and spiritual practice. The poem is reflective of Guru's broader ethical framework, which saw compassion not as an abstract ideal but as a lived reality, essential for creating a just and harmonious society. Through Malayalam, Guru could communicate these values in a tone that was intimate, persuasive, and emotionally resonant.

What is particularly striking about Guru's use of Malayalam is the way he infused the language with philosophical resonance without sacrificing its natural flow. His verses are free of unnecessary ornamentation, yet they are imbued with rhythmic beauty and intellectual depth. Guru understood the musicality inherent in the language and used it effectively to enhance the meditative quality of his poems. The cadence of his verses often mirrors the contemplative mood he seeks to inspire, drawing the reader or listener into a deeper engagement with the ideas being presented.

Guru's choice to write extensively in Malayalam was also a strategic response to the socio-political realities of his time. The late 19th and early 20th centuries were periods of significant social ferment in Kerala, with increasing demands for education, rights, and social mobility among the oppressed classes. By speaking directly in the people's language, Guru aligned himself with these emerging aspirations, offering a philosophical and ethical framework that supported and legitimised their struggles.

Moreover, Malayalam as a literary medium allowed Guru to experiment with forms and expressions that were uniquely

suited to his reformist and philosophical agenda. He seamlessly blended poetry with ethical instruction, devotional fervor with rational critique, and personal reflection with universal truths. This fluidity of form and content made his Malayalam works not only popular but also enduringly relevant.

The impact of Guru's Malayalam writings extended beyond literature into the realms of education, politics, religion and social reform. His ideas, expressed in the vernacular, influenced generations of thinkers, writers, and social activists in Kerala. The simplicity and directness of his language enabled his works to be memorized, recited, and passed down orally, further embedding his philosophy into the cultural consciousness of the region, if not the nation.

2.2.4 Tamil: Connecting with Siddha and Bhakti Traditions

Sree Narayana Guru's engagement with Tamil marks yet another dimension of his trilingual scholarship and broad spiritual vision. His knowledge of Tamil was not confined to linguistic competence; it was deeply rooted in his familiarity with the rich philosophical, devotional, and literary traditions of Tamil Nadu, especially the Siddha and Bhakti movements. Through Tamil, Guru found a natural connection to South India's diverse spiritual heritage, further expanding the geographical and cultural reach of his reformist and philosophical ideas.

The Tamil language, with its ancient and vast literary tradition, had long served as the medium for expressing mystical, devotional, and socially transformative ideas. Guru's exposure to Tamil poetry allowed him to internalize the distinct features of both Siddha mysticism and Bhakti devotionalism, two streams that had historically challenged orthodox structures and advocated for egalitarian spiritual experiences. The Alwars and Nayanmars, central figures of the Tamil Bhakti tradition, composed hymns that emphasized personal devotion, inner purity, and direct communion with the divine, often rejecting ritualistic practices and caste hierarchies. Similarly, the Tamil Siddha poets explored the realms of body-mind transcendence, yogic disciplines, and non-dualistic metaphysics, conveying profound truths in simple, clear expressions.

For Sree Narayana Guru, Tamil became an important bridge that connected him not only to these powerful literary traditions but also to a wider South Indian audience. It expanded his cultural horizon and reinforced his commitment to breaking down social barriers and religious orthodoxies. Through Tamil, Guru absorbed the Bhakti tradition's emphasis on universal love, ethical living, and devotion beyond caste constraints, which resonated perfectly with his own ideals. The Siddha influence, meanwhile, strengthened his philosophical inclination towards inner realisation, self-discipline, and experiential knowledge, which became central to his later works.

Guru's engagement with Tamil is evident in both his thought and expression. While not as extensive as his Malayalam or Sanskrit contributions, his Tamil hymns and verses reflect a distinct devotional fervor, echoing the emotional intensity of the Bhakti school. These compositions are notable for their simplicity, lyrical beauty, and moral clarity, making them accessible to ordinary people while carrying profound philosophical undertones. In these Tamil works, Guru continues his characteristic blending of spiritual insight with social

critique, using the language not just for worship but as a tool to question social evils and promote human dignity.

Significantly, the Tamil Bhakti and Siddha traditions had always carried an anti-caste and anti-ritualistic stance, often challenging the Brahminical monopoly over religious and spiritual practices. Guru's affinity with these traditions was natural, as he too sought to dismantle the rigid caste structures that oppressed vast sections of society. His Tamil compositions reflect this shared commitment to social justice, urging people to move beyond external rituals and focus on cultivating inner purity and compassion.

By engaging with Tamil, Guru also reinforced the pan-South Indian nature of his reform movement. He recognized that the issues of caste discrimination, untouchability, and social exclusion were not confined to Kerala but were prevalent across the southern states. Tamil, therefore, became a strategic linguistic and cultural choice, allowing him to communicate his vision of spiritual equality and universal brotherhood to a broader audience. It also enabled him to connect with Tamil scholars, mystics, and reformers, fostering a dialogue that enriched both his philosophy and his reformist strategies.

What is particularly noteworthy is how Guru managed to preserve the emotional intensity of Bhakti while embedding his Tamil compositions with philosophical depth and ethical reflection. His verses do not merely invoke the divine but also challenge the devotee to engage in self-examination, ethical conduct, and a compassionate outlook towards fellow beings. In this way, his Tamil works functioned both as spiritual hymns and social manifestos, continuing the tradition of poets who saw no divide between the sacred and the secular.

2.2.5 The Interplay of Languages in Guru's Works

One of the most fascinating and intellectually rich aspects of Sree Narayana Guru's literary genius is his seamless interplay of languages within his works. Guru's trilingual scholarship was not compartmentalized; rather, it manifested as a fluid and dynamic integration of Malayalam, Sanskrit, and Tamil, reflecting his inclusive, universalist outlook and his profound understanding that language, at its best, serves as a bridge—uniting ideas, cultures, and people.

Guru's ability to move effortlessly across these three linguistic traditions allowed him to interpret philosophical concepts beyond the limitations of any single language. Each language brought with it a distinct cultural, literary, and philosophical heritage, and Guru harnessed the strength of each to craft a body of work that was not only spiritually profound but also linguistically rich and culturally expansive. This synthesis enriched his poetry and prose, giving it a layered quality where meaning operated simultaneously at philosophical, devotional, and social levels.

A striking example of this interplay is evident in Guru's Malayalam compositions that are densely populated with Sanskrit philosophical terms and ideas. Although he wrote for the common people in their mother tongue, Guru did not hesitate to draw upon Sanskrit philosophical vocabulary, carefully embedding terms like Atman, Maya, Brahman, and Moksha within his Malayalam verses. These words, though derived from Sanskrit, carried layers of philosophical meaning that were essential for conveying complex metaphysical concepts. By doing so, Guru introduced Vedantic and Upaniṣadic thought into the everyday speech of the

common people, effectively bridging the gap between classical philosophy and vernacular expression.

Equally compelling is Guru's use of Tamil imagery and idioms within his Malayalam devotional hymns. His familiarity with Tamil Bhakti and Siddha traditions allowed him to enrich his Malayalam poetry with symbolic references and emotive expressions that bore the imprint of Tamil spiritual culture. This cross-pollination of imagery broadened the aesthetic range of his Malayalam works, giving them a distinct texture that resonated with both Malayali and Tamil sensibilities. For instance, Guru's references to metaphors common in Tamil devotional poetry—such as the journey of the soul, the human body as a temple, or the imagery of divine grace as an overflowing flood—infused his verses with emotional intensity and philosophical depth drawn from multiple traditions.

Guru's mastery of Sanskrit metres further exemplifies this intricate interplay of languages. Even when writing in Malayalam, he often employed classical Sanskrit metres like Anushtup, Shardula Vikridita, and Vasantatilakam, thereby imparting a musical and rhythmic quality typically associated with Sanskrit poetry. This stylistic choice added structural elegance and lyrical cadence to his vernacular compositions, elevating them beyond mere prose or simple verse. The rhythm of these classical metres complemented the spiritual themes Guru explored, enhancing the meditative and reflective experience of his readers and listeners.

What is particularly noteworthy is that Guru did not treat these languages as isolated domains. Instead, he wove them together into a unified literary and philosophical fabric, allowing each to contribute its strengths while compensating for the limitations of the others. This organic integration of languages reflects Guru's larger vision of oneness and universality—the idea that just as humanity is one despite differences of caste, creed, or color, so too language is a diverse yet ultimately unified medium of expression.

This trilingual interplay also served a strategic purpose. By blending languages, Guru made his works accessible to a wider audience while simultaneously anchoring them in the classical philosophical traditions of India. He could reach the local farmer, the temple priest, the philosophical scholar, and the wandering ascetic—all within the same literary canvas. His compositions transcended linguistic barriers, enabling conversations across communities and intellectual traditions that might otherwise have remained insular.

In many ways, Guru's linguistic synthesis mirrored the syncretic cultural landscape of Kerala and South India, where centuries of interaction among different communities had created a rich mosaic of languages, religions, and philosophies. Guru did not merely reflect this cultural plurality; he consciously employed it as a literary device and a philosophical stance, reinforcing his commitment to unity and inclusivity.

Ultimately, the interplay of languages in Guru's works stands as a testament to his visionary understanding of language as a tool of empowerment, enlightenment, and social transformation. By skillfully navigating the linguistic streams of Malayalam, Sanskrit, and Tamil, Guru created a literary tradition that was both deeply rooted in classical wisdom and expansively modern in its reach and relevance. His works continue to exemplify how language, when used

with mastery and purpose, can transcend barriers and serve as a powerful medium for spiritual insight, social reform, and cultural integration.

2.2.6 Trilingualism as a Tool for Democratising Knowledge

Sree Narayana Guru's exceptional trilingual scholarship was a deliberate strategy to democratize knowledge and spirituality, challenging the upper castes' control over learning. By mastering Sanskrit, Malayalam, and Tamil, Guru dismantled centuries-old structures that linked spiritual wisdom to birth and linguistic exclusivity.

Sanskrit, traditionally the elite language of scriptures and philosophy, was inaccessible to the marginalized. Guru's choice to compose profound works like Darsanamala in Sanskrit, despite his non-Brahmin background, was revolutionary. It asserted that true spiritual insight transcends social stratification, reclaiming Sanskrit as a universal medium. Addressing the privileged in their own language was a potent way to convey the inevitability of change.

Recognizing Sanskrit's limited reach, Guru used Malayalam as his primary language for social reform and ethical instruction. He crafted verses and reflections directly addressing the masses, discussing social evils and ideals of equality. His famous Malayalam declaration, "One Caste, One Religion, One God for Mankind," became a clarion call for unity, ensuring spiritual knowledge reached common discourse.

Guru's Tamil proficiency connected him deeply with South Indian Bhakti and Siddha traditions, which challenged caste and celebrated personal devotion. Tamil, rich in devotional and philosophical poetry, extended his influence beyond Kerala, engaging with anti-ritualistic, anti-caste discourses. This made his mission of spiritual equality pan-South Indian.

His linguistic versatility was central to his project: Sanskrit for scholars, Malayalam for social reform and empowering ordinary people, and Tamil for regional connections. This trilingual capability broke down linguistic, social, and intellectual barriers, creating a universal platform where caste, birth, and language ceased to be markers of superiority. By writing in all three, Guru demonstrated that the quest for truth is a universal human endeavor. His linguistic inclusivity embodied his preached values: equality, unity, and human dignity, turning diversity into a bridge, not a barrier.

2.2.7 Influence and Legacy of Guru's Trilingual Scholarship

The trilingual scholarship of Sree Narayana Guru stands as one of the most enduring aspects of his legacy, profoundly influencing not only the cultural and intellectual landscape of Kerala but also shaping the broader philosophical and social discourse in South India. Guru's unique ability to operate seamlessly in Malayalam, Sanskrit, and Tamil served as a catalyst for linguistic and cultural integration at a time when social divisions based on caste, language, and ritualistic orthodoxy were deeply entrenched.

Guru's multilingual approach broke conventional barriers and demonstrated that language could be a force of unity rather than division. By weaving together the classical depth of Sanskrit, the vernacular immediacy of Malayalam, and the devotional richness of Tamil, Guru created a literary and philosophical oeuvre that transcended regional and cultural boundaries. His works resonated not only

with the scholars immersed in India's classical traditions but also with common people yearning for social justice, spiritual clarity, and moral guidance.

The impact of this linguistic versatility was far-reaching. Guru's trilingual model inspired a generation of reformers, poets, and thinkers who recognized the power of addressing diverse audiences through multiple languages. Subsequent social movements and literary circles in Kerala and Tamil Nadu adopted similar approaches, blending local languages with classical idioms to engage wider sections of society. Guru's method demonstrated that true reform and spiritual awakening must communicate across layers of society, reaching the learned and the layperson alike. By doing so, he laid the foundation for a more inclusive intellectual culture, where literature and philosophy were no longer confined to elite circles but belonged to the people.

Moreover, Guru's trilingual contributions continue to attract scholarly attention across multiple disciplines. His Sanskrit works, particularly Darsanamala, remain important texts in the study of Indian philosophy and Advaita Vedanta. Scholars of literature analyze his poetic style, diction, and innovative use of metre, while sociologists and historians view his writings as central to understanding the social reform movements in colonial and pre-modern Kerala. Linguists, too, find his works significant for the way they reflect linguistic synthesis and cultural hybridity, offering rare examples of philosophical thought articulated through a harmonious blend of three distinct linguistic traditions.

Guru's influence extends into the modern educational and cultural consciousness of Kerala and South India, where his compositions are studied not merely as historical artifacts but as living texts that continue to inspire ethical reflection, social responsibility, and spiritual inquiry. His use of Malayalam validated the vernacular as a legitimate medium for serious philosophical discourse, paving the way for the flourishing of Malayalam philosophical literature. His Sanskrit works reclaimed classical knowledge from the confines of ritualistic elitism, while his Tamil engagement strengthened cross-cultural bonds with neighboring regions.

In essence, the legacy of Guru's trilingual scholarship is one of integration—of languages, cultures, and philosophies. It stands as a model of how intellectual and spiritual leaders can use language not as a tool of exclusion, but as a bridge that connects diverse peoples in the shared pursuit of truth, justice, and enlightenment. Guru's works continue to illuminate classrooms, temples, literary gatherings, and social reform platforms, affirming his place as a visionary thinker whose linguistic mastery served a higher moral and philosophical purpose. His trilingualism remains not just a personal achievement but a symbol of his larger mission—to create a society where knowledge flows freely, where wisdom belongs to all, and where language, in its many forms, becomes a unifying force for humanity.

Recap

- Guru's trilingualism bridged cultural and social divides
- Malayalam was used for social reform and connecting with common people
- Sanskrit enabled philosophical precision and universal spiritual communication
- Tamil reflected his connection to Bhakti and Siddha traditions
- Guru's poetic diction was shaped by his multilingual proficiency
- The fusion of languages allowed deeper spiritual and philosophical expression
- His use of Tamil connected him with South Indian spiritual heritage
- Sanskrit compositions like Darsanamala reflect profound philosophical insights
- Malayalam writings addressed caste and social issues directly
- Trilingualism reflected Guru's vision of inclusivity and universality
- His poetic style blended simplicity with depth and accessibility
- Tamil influences enriched his poetic diction and thematic depth
- Sanskrit provided a classical framework for philosophical expression
- Guru's language choices were deliberate and context-driven
- His trilingual approach fostered a dialogue among diverse traditions
- Poetic diction served as a tool for social critique and spiritual awakening
- Linguistic diversity in his works reflected his vision of social unity
- Malayalam was used to democratize knowledge and engage the masses
- Sanskrit linked his works to ancient philosophical traditions
- Tamil reflected a devotional and egalitarian spirit
- Trilingualism as a democratizing force broke caste barriers

- His language choices mirrored the cultural plurality of Kerala and South India
- Through trilingualism, Guru challenged linguistic hierarchies
- His literary synthesis exemplified cultural integration and reform
- The interplay of languages demonstrated the fusion of tradition and modernity

Objective Questions

1. Which three languages did Sree Narayana Guru master?
2. What is the primary role of Guru's multilingual proficiency?
3. Which language did Guru primarily use for social reform?
4. What kind of personality does Guru's multilingualism reflect?
5. What type of poems did Guru compose in Sanskrit?
6. What was Guru's approach to using Sanskrit words in Malayalam poetry?
7. What was the social impact of Guru's use of Malayalam?
8. Which language did Guru use for philosophical and classical themes?
9. What is the significance of Tamil in Guru's literary output?
10. What does Guru's trilingual ability demonstrate in his poetic works?

Answers

1. Malayalam, Sanskrit, Tamil
2. Inclusivity
3. Malayalam
4. Cosmopolitan

5. Stotras
6. Balanced
7. Empowerment
8. Sanskrit
9. Tradition
10. Versatility

Assignments

1. Discuss the significance of trilingualism in Guru's literary works.
2. Analyze the role of Malayalam in Guru's social reform efforts.
3. How did Sanskrit enable philosophical clarity in Guru's poetry?
4. Explain the influence of Tamil Bhakti traditions on Guru's compositions.
5. Evaluate how linguistic diversity shaped Guru's poetic diction.

SGOU

BLOCK - 2

UNIT

Guru's Use of Plain Speech

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- understand the significance of plain speech in Guru's reformist philosophy
- analyse how simplicity in language fosters inclusivity and social change
- appreciate Guru's ability to express profound truths in accessible terms
- recognise the role of plain speech in democratizing spiritual knowledge

Prerequisites

Sree Narayana Guru's embrace of plain, direct speech was not simply a stylistic choice but a profound philosophical stance and a deliberate reformist strategy. In an era where knowledge was often mystified, cloaked in ritualistic complexity, and confined to the privileged few, Guru's decision to speak and write in simple, accessible language represented a radical break from tradition. It was, above all, an ethical and political act, a conscious effort to democratize knowledge and dismantle the hierarchies of language, caste, and learning that defined his time.

The power structures Guru confronted were deeply entrenched. Sanskrit, while revered as the language of sacred knowledge and philosophical inquiry, remained beyond the reach of the majority. The Brahminical elite used it as both a medium and a weapon to preserve their monopoly over spiritual and intellectual life. Ordinary people, deprived of access to scriptures and philosophical texts, remained dependent on intermediaries, priests and scholars, whose interpretations often

served to reinforce caste hierarchies and social divisions. Against this backdrop, Guru's preference for clarity, simplicity, and accessibility was revolutionary. He believed that spiritual truths are universal and self-evident; they do not require elaborate verbal ornamentation or esoteric symbolism to be valid. For Guru, the truest expression of wisdom lies in its ability to reach and transform the common person, to touch the lives of farmers, laborers, and housewives as much as it speaks to scholars and philosophers.

Key themes

Plain Speech, Social Reform, Inclusivity, Democratization, Philosophy, Language Simplicity, Social Critique

Discussion

Sree Narayana Guru chose the plain speech and rejected the elitist belief that wisdom and philosophy were the preserve of those trained in intricate dialectics or scholastic traditions. He understood that mystification of knowledge serves only to exclude and alienate, while simplicity enables inclusion. His democratic vision of knowledge insisted that every human being, regardless of birth, caste, or education, had the right to access and understand the highest truths of existence. Moreover, Guru's plain speech was not devoid of depth. Rather, his simplicity amplified the force of his philosophical insights, making them resonate with greater clarity and immediacy. He demonstrated that profound ideas, such as the oneness of humanity, the illusory nature of caste, or the fleetingness of worldly attachments, could be expressed without complex metaphors or flowery diction and still move people toward reflection and change.

Sree Narayana Guru's famous aphorisms, such as "One caste, one religion, one God for mankind," delivered with disarming clarity, exemplify his method. Stripped of jargon, these utterances challenged social prejudices and fundamental assumptions on identity and humanity. Guru transformed philosophy from an elite cerebral exercise to a tool for liberation and ethical awakening. His plain speech mirrored society's absurdities and injustices, leaving no denial.

Guru understood language's psychological impact: simplicity invited engagement, complexity intimidated. Everyday examples grounded abstract philosophy in lived experience, rendering it practical and memorable. His plain speech also de-sacralised the caste system, exposing its illogical foundations through common language and universal human experiences like birth and death, rather than polemics.

Crucially, Guru's plain speech empowered the marginalised, directly restoring agency to those historically silenced in religious, philosophical, and

social discourse. His use of Malayalam and simple diction affirmed that all, regardless of occupation, were entitled to understand dharma. This approach fostered a new tradition of direct, rational, and ethical social discourse in Kerala, influencing subsequent reformers and inspiring contemporary movements emphasising clarity and public engagement.

In essence, Guru's plain speech redefined language, knowledge, and power, proving simplicity's profound nature. By removing linguistic barriers, he made knowledge a shared human inheritance, liberating people to understand their oppression and spiritual potential. His legacy reminds us that simple words transform, awakening minds, healing divisions, and leading to justice and enlightenment.

Dr Rākēśh Cherukōṭ observes that "language in discourse functions as a kind of performance." Society, visible and invisible, participates. Each linguistic sign generates meanings, tapping into hidden generative codes and ancient societal memories. Discourse can absorb or negate memories, rooted in the collective unconscious (as per Jungian psychoanalysis). Discourse transcends systematic sign interaction. Ferdinand de Saussure famously differentiated "langue" (language rules) and "parole" (individual utterance), akin to chess rules versus player moves. However, discourse can be subversive, challenging systems and dismantling authority, compelling societal reassessment. This essay analyses alternative sign arrangements within Sree Narayana Guru's discourse structure

Guru's period was marked by linguistic domination through various colonial symbol systems, those of the Aryan, the Portuguese, and the British powers. The symbolic system of discourse was shaped by the limits of these dominating desires. Guru, however, stepped outside these boundaries to construct alternative symbolic formations. His discourses on environmental exploitation, for instance, transcend the dominant codes of his time and leap toward a future-oriented vision:

ഒടുങ്ങാത്ത ആവശ്യങ്ങൾ മനുഷ്യർക്കല്ലാതെ മറ്റൊരു മൃഗത്തിനുമില്ല...

(No animals other than humans have endless needs.)

പച്ച നിറഞ്ഞ പ്രകൃതിയെ വികൃതമാക്കി ശൂന്യതയിലാഴ്ത്തുന്നു...

(To deform the greenery of nature into avoid)

Here, Guru critiques the unbridled greed of humanity and the devastation wrought upon nature. Through such statements, he draws the future into the present because signs of ecological colonisation were already present in his time. By historicising these early signs, Guru arrives at insights that continue to resonate with our present-day crises. Discourse must be able to transcend the boundaries of its time, which requires deep engagement with the present. Guru succeeded in doing this with exclusive precision.

2.3.1 Plain Speech as a Philosophical and Reformist Strategy

Rather than being a cerebral exercise reserved for elite intellectuals, philosophy became, in his hands, a tool of liberation and ethical awakening. His plain speech acted as a mirror to society, reflecting its absurdities, contradictions, and injustices in language so clear that it left no room for denial or obfuscation.

Guru's approach also drew from his

deep understanding of the psychological impact of language. He recognized that complexity often intimidates and distances, while simplicity invites engagement. By using examples drawn from everyday life, eating, bathing, relationships, or the life of nature, Guru created analogies that his audience could instantly relate to. These real-life images grounded abstract philosophical concepts in lived experiences, making them practical, memorable, and actionable.

Furthermore, his plain speech was instrumental in de-sacralizing the caste system and exposing its illogical foundations. By employing ordinary language and common experiences, Guru laid bare the artificiality of caste distinctions. His verses, such as those in Jati Nirnayam and Jati Mimamsa, question caste not through polemics but through basic human logic and the realities of birth and death, the universals that transcend all social constructs.

Another vital dimension of Guru's plain speech was its role in empowering the marginalized and voiceless. By addressing them directly, without mediation, Guru restored their potential to those historically denied a voice in matters of religion, philosophy, and social order. His use of Malayalam and his plain diction made it clear that even the farmer in the field, the laborer, the fisherman, and the weaver were entitled to understand and practice dharma as any scholar or priest could.

Guru's plain speech also paved the way for a new tradition of social discourse in Kerala, influencing reformers, poets, and thinkers who followed his practice. The leaders of the social renaissance in Kerala adopted his method of addressing the people directly, focusing on rational thought, ethical living, and social responsibility, often using a similar straightforward language. His model continues to inspire contemporary education, literature, and activism, where the emphasis remains on clarity, accessibility, and direct engagement with the public.

2.3.2 Examples of Guru's Plain and Insightful Speech

Sree Narayana Guru's use of plain speech was most strikingly visible in the numerous instances where his simple yet profound words exposed social contradictions, questioned blind traditions, and illuminated universal truths. His plain speech, often delivered through everyday examples, anecdotes, or short philosophical remarks, became instruments of reform, humor, and reflection, remembered and repeated across generations.

One of the most cited examples of his plain yet piercing speech is his retort during the consecration of the Shiva idol at Aruvippuram. When confronted by upper-caste Brahmins questioning his right to install an idol, Guru calmly declared, "This is our Shiva." (നാം നമ്മുടെ ശിവനെയാണ് പ്രതിഷ്ഠിച്ചത്) (We conservated our own Lord Siva) In just a few words, Guru challenged centuries of religious hegemony and asserted the right of all humans, to performan the act, irrespective of caste and engage directly with the divine. The simplicity of this statement belied its revolutionary import, without rhetoric or anger, it coveyed them the message that it was not their Lord Shiva, which he installed for the marginalized to worship. Thus Guru dismantled the caste-based monopoly over religious rituals through the power of his plain speech.

Another legendary instance is his famous response to the absurdity of caste distinctions applied even to nature. When

orthodox critics questioned the caste of the fish in the temple pond, Guru responded, "Ask the fish its caste." This reply, delivered without anger or scholarly debate, was both humorous and philosophically sharp. It exposed the irrationality of extending human-made caste distinctions to animals and nature, making the listener confront the baselessness of caste prejudices. Such statements were philosophy in action, designed to trigger thought and self-reflection, using common sense rather than complex arguments.

When faced with the question, "If God created man and then instituted the fourfold caste system (cāturvarṇyam), who then created those who do not belong to any of these four castes? Which group do they fall into?", Guru responded with a disarmingly radical answer:

"If they are not part of God's creation or the fourfold caste system, then let us consider them as self-made gods (svayaṃ bhukkalaaya dēvanmār)."

This response contains within it the medicine to deconstruct the very foundations of the Puruṣasūkta, which proclaims that Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas, and Śūdras all originated from Brahmā. Even the gods are said to have originated from Brahmā. But Guru raises a provocative question, what about those who stand outside this myth of divine creation? By calling these people "self-made gods," Guru completely disrupts the established order of mythic and social hierarchies. He composes a sentence that joins what was never meant to be joined, a deliberate linguistic revolution.

When the body of Brahmā is metaphorically transformed into the framework of a worldly constitution, both gods and indigenous people are placed outside of this structure. Gods are imagined to exist above the system as sovereign decision-makers. Indigenous people, on the other hand, are defined by their aparathvam (inferiority or exclusion). The constitution that defines who has authority and who does not have it, is precisely what Guru critiques, and mocks, through the very structure of his speech. By bringing "self-made gods" and ādimanivāsikaḷ (indigenous people) together in a single phrase, Guru shakes the very foundation of their social positions. Through the power of humour, he transforms what is considered "untouchable" and inferior into something elevated and divine. Such discourse confronts and dismantles the foundational assumptions of the social structure, not through rebellion or violence, but through poetic and philosophical irony. It is a form of discursive protest to subrent the brahminical stance through Guru's speech rooted in humour and linguistic reimagination.

During a visit to the home of the poet Mūlūr, Guru noticed a dog bowing in submission near the doorstep.

Guru remarked:

"This one clearly hasn't learned Sanskrit, but it must have listened to someone teaching it!"

In this unexpected moment of language play, Guru draws a parallel between the dog's posture of submission and the pedagogical methods of Sanskrit education. At first glance, it might seem like he is making a sarcastic observation about the dog's body. But in truth, his sentence targets something deeper, not the dog's physiology, but the epistemology of Sanskrit learning.

The "bowing" is not just a behaviour. It becomes a metaphor for subjugation, for how traditional Sanskrit learning systems

condition individuals into hierarchical obedience. Thus, the "arrow" (his wit) is aimed not at the dog but at the pedagogy itself. Through this metaphor, Guru critiques the aesthetic and ideological dominance of Sanskrit within elite literary circles. He challenges the prevalence of idealised images, gods, lotuses, divine mountains, etc., which dominate traditional Sanskrit poetics. These metaphors often exclude lived reality, rendering abstract and disconnected knowledge.

Against this backdrop, Guru's focus on the dog's śarīrabhāṣā (body language) becomes radical. He generates an alternative knowledge system through humorous contrast, turning the dominant aesthetic upside-down. In doing so, Guru disrupts the standardised language hierarchy upheld by ruling systems. His naturalistic metaphors and bodily observations introduce a form of poetic and philosophical disobedience, a refusal to conform to the aesthetic ideals imposed by Brahmanical structures. Thus, in the image of the bowed dog, Guru captures the absurdity of blind obedience, whether to scriptural authority, social hierarchy, or linguistic domination. The following catechism is relevant in this context:

- Disciple: O revered Guru, knower of dharma! Would you kindly expound upon the common duties (sāmānya-dharma) of humankind?

- Guru: Dharma may be broadly categorised into five: ahiṃsā (non-violence), satya (truthfulness), asteya (non-stealing), avyabhicāra (continence), and madya-varjana (abstinence from intoxicants).

These five values Guru upholds as the fivefold path of Dharma need further analysis.

a. Ahiṃsā (Non-violence)

Among all dharmas, ahiṃsā is considered the highest. Great souls such as the Buddha attained mokṣa (liberation) by upholding the path of non-violence.

Ahiṃsā entails refraining from causing harm to any living being, whether in thought, word, or deed. The enlightened declare that all dharma resides in non-violence, while all adharma (unrighteousness) is rooted in violence. One who truly observes ahiṃsā is loved and trusted by all beings, just as they would love their own mother.

b. Truthfulness (Satya)

Truth (satya) is eternal (sanātana) and is itself brahman (ultimate reality). This world abides in satya, the real. Hence, one must always speak the truth and never utter a lie. He who lives by the truth becomes, in effect, a yogi; whatever he says unfailingly comes to pass.

c. Non-stealing (Asteya)

Asteya is the practice of neither coveting nor seizing another's wealth or possessions.

Theft is the root cause of many calamities. Refraining from it leads to prosperity, while engaging in it results in disgrace. The noble renounce theft in thought, word, and deed. Just as one would avoid a rabid dog, the virtuous inevitably shun the company of those degraded by acts of theft.

d. Chastity [അവ്യഭിചാരം]

To gaze at, converse with, or associate with another's wife with particular intent is considered adultery [വ്യഭിചാരം].

Through adulterous behaviour, one suffers premature destruction of status,

honour, wisdom, wealth, conduct, lineage, and even life. For an adulterer, not only does daylight seem like darkness, but he is also unable to experience natural joy. No one finds it agreeable when their own wife unites with another man. Therefore, those who desire worldly and spiritual happiness must certainly renounce adultery.

e. Abstinence from Intoxicants [മദ്യവർജ്ജനം]

Alcohol is a substance that distorts the intellect; it is akin to poison. Hence, no one should consume liquor.

Liquor (kaḷḷu) [കള്ള്], country liquor (arrack - ചാരായം), cannabis [കഞ്ചാവ്], tobacco [പുകയില], and similar intoxicants that impair reason are categorised under alcohol.

Alcohol is a substance that leads to sin. Therefore, a wise person should never sell it, offer it to others, purchase it for oneself, or store it.

Even innocent children mock and reject a person who is disgraced through drinking liquor. Those who are discerning shun such a person as though they had seen a victim of cholera [വിഷൂചി].

The one who manufactures liquor will be foul-smelling. His clothes, house, and everything he touches reek of stench.

A drunkard is detested by his wife, father, mother, brother, son, and even God. Hence, no one should drink alcohol.

Those who practise the Fivefold Path of Righteousness [ധർമ്മപഞ്ചകം] will enjoy supreme happiness both in this life and after life

Śuddhi Pañcakam [ശുദ്ധിപഞ്ചകം] – The Fivefold Purification

From "Śrī Nārāyaṇa Dharmaṃ" [ശ്രീനാരായണധർമ്മം], the following catechism is included:

Disciple: Revered Embodiment of Wisdom [ജ്ഞാനമൂർത്തേ], we have understood the Fivefold Righteous Path [ധർമ്മപഞ്ചകം]. Kindly now reveal to us what the Fivefold Purification process is.

Guru: Let me explain each aspect of the Fivefold Purification process. As seekers of purity, do listen carefully.

The five principal purities essential for human beings are:

- Bodily purity [ശരീരശുദ്ധി],
- Purity of speech [വാക്ശുദ്ധി],
- Purity of mind [മനഃശുദ്ധി],
- Purity of the senses [ഇന്ദ്രിയശുദ്ധി], and
- Purity of the home [ഗൃഹശുദ്ധി].

a. Bodily Purity [ശരീരശുദ്ധി]

Daily bathing in clean water, cleaning the eyes, ears, teeth, and nails, wearing unstained clothes, breathing fresh air, eating good food, drinking pure water, and keeping hands and feet always clean — these constitute bodily purity.

b. Purity of Speech [വാക്ശുദ്ധി]

Words should be clear, sweet, distinct, attractive, and civil. These qualities are indispensable to pure language.

If speech is beneficial to all, truthful, and impartial, it is considered pure speech.

c. Purity of Mind [മനഃശുദ്ധി]

Uprightness, affection, compassion, gentleness, courage, modesty, and contemplation — these are the foundations of purity of mind.

d. Purity of the Senses [ഇന്ദ്രിയശുദ്ധി]

Avoid engaging in improper actions, do not torment or pamper the senses excessively, and refrain from approaching what is unreasonable — these practices purify the five senses.

e. Purity of the Home [ഗൃഹശുദ്ധി]

The interiors of homes must receive sunlight and fresh air. All decayed or spoiled items must be removed, and the house and its surroundings kept clean at all times.

Defecation or urination in the surroundings must be avoided. In the evenings, incense or fragrant substances should be burnt to purify the space. This constitutes purity of the home.

One who follows this fivefold purification process, which grants long life, health, happiness, and spiritual well-being — shall be full of energy, esteemed, long-lived, and healthy in this world.

It is to be understood that Sree Narayana Guru did more than merely deliver this message. He lived by it, setting an example through his own life. The words of Gandhi, "My life is my message," aptly apply to Sree Narayana Guru as well. He when deeply into the unity of mankind, expressing his vision through these priceless pieces of advice. He proclaimed the motto "One caste, one religion, one God for humanity." as early as 1904, on the establishment of the Śivagiri Maṭham [ശിവഗിരിമഠം], or hermitage. Its Malayalam rendition as a full length poem appeared in 1920, under the title "Jati Nirnayam" [ജാതിനിർണയം], presented on his 65th birthday. In this, he emphasised: 'One in kind, one in faith, one in God is man, of one same womb, and one same form, one there is at all."

Guru Devan advocated for communal dining (mishra bhojanam) [മിശ്രഭോജനം] and inter-caste marriages (mishra vivaham) [മിശ്രവിവാഹം], asserting that differences in religion, attire, or language should not hinder such unions, as all belong to the same kind. His aim was always the unity of humanity.

In his youth, Guru Devan minded those people who were considered lower in caste, challenging societal norms. During his higher studies, he cured Chathan Pulayan [ചാത്തൻ പുലയൻ], a leprosy patient, and in 1904, he established a school for the Pulayars [പുലയർ], or untouchables of those times, in Chempazhanthi [ചെമ്പഴന്തി] with the assistance of Dr. Palpu [ഡോ. പൽപ്പു]. These actions were both a protest against caste discrimination and a reassertion of his compassion for these subalterns.

Guru Devan once remarked, "If someone sees me as an incarnation, let it be for the eradication of caste discrimination." His teachings reflect a vision of a unified world order.

In a conversation with his disciple C.V. Kunhiraman Guru Devan said: "During Buddha's time, violence was rampant; hence, he emphasised non-violence. In Christ's era, love was lacking; thus, he highlighted love. Perhaps during the Prophet's time, there was a need to stress brotherhood, which his religion reflects. Today, what India needs is liberation from the competition among castes and religions "to establish their faith.

Guru Devan advocated liberation from the bondage of caste and religious divisions by popularizing education.

While figures like Buddha, Christ, and the Prophet (Mohammed) are known as founders of religions, Sree Narayana Guru

did not strike to establish a new religion but only stood for a universal world order. In 1897, he taught, "All religions convey the same essence." He emphasised that regardless of religion, what matters is the goodness of the individual. He questioned the utility of religion if it doesn't lead to human betterment. He believed that one can achieve goodness within the frame of any religion, exposing the futility of religious conversion, which was popular during his times.

In today's world, establishments such as interfaith schools among all religious sects assume more crucial significance than ever. In the present-day world tainted by religious stigma and zeal for extremism, studying the essence of all religions with equal respect will resolve conflicts. This is the only solution to end terrorism on the globe: the establishment of the institution to promote peace and reduce conflicts. This was Guru Devan's profound vision.

Guru Devan instructs:"Religions are mere guides aiding subtle inquiry. For one who has realised the subtle, religion is not the authority; he becomes the authority of the religion."

From this philosophical standpoint, Guru Devan openly declared that he did not belong to any particular religion or caste. However, to realise the subtle truth or God, followers should adhere to their respective religious doctrines, ensuring that their practices do not hinder others' lives and faiths. Sree Narayana's vision transcends the limitations of all religions, embracing a universal perspective in the pursuit of truth.

During his 1918 visit to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), a wealthy Muslim named Khader [ഖാദർ] met the Guru and became his devotee. By 1926, when Guru Devan visited Ceylon again, Khader had adopted the monastic name Skandaswami [സ്കന്ദസ്വാമി]. When he requested to join Guru Devan's monastery, the Guru responded, "Khader can join our monastery as Khader; there's no need to become Skandaswami." Similarly, when Chacko [ചാക്കോ], a resident of the Advaita Ashram [അദ്വൈതാശ്രമം] in Aluva [ആലുവ], donned saffron robes and took the name Sree Narayana Dasan [ശ്രീനാരായണദാസൻ], Guru Devan remarked, "It's sufficient for Chacko to remain Chacko in our ashram; no need to become Sree Narayana Dasan." If believers who are the companies of our time can embrace these liberal views, harmony can easily be attained. Only a great soul who perceives all faith and the whole world as one can cultivate this attitude, substantiating how Guru Devan became a prophet of universal humanity. If the Vatican's plea for a world parliament diverse of religions could adopt and study this approach, it would be a big initiative towards achieving the goal.

In the Neyyattinkara region, religious conversions were common practice. Later, with the strengthening of SNDP Yogam activities, many of them returned to their original faith, and Guru Devan accepted them without any reluctance, as documented in 'Vivekodayam'. Guru Devan believed that those who had converted from their original faith to some other could be welcomed back if they wished to return by themselves. His advice was obvious:. He advised, "No one should attempt to change or convert others. It's sufficient for each person to decide where they should remain."

The messages Guru Devan conveyed to Khader, Chacko, and the converts of Neyyattinkara are the religious insights the world needs to imbibe today. Religious conversion has both internal and external

aspects. Efforts for external religious conversion should be discouraged. Internal transformation continues to occur and is impossible to be prevented in individuals. Guru Devan's perception that forceful conversion is unnecessary is evident from his conversations with C.V. Kunhiraman in addition to what we find in his verses.

Guru Devan taught us love of humanity above the dogmatic view of the religion. This pure humanistic vision is the essence of his philosophy. He viewed the world as one, dismantling the barriers of caste, religion, and nationality. He proclaimed, "Period of dividing walls of caste or race, or hatred or rival faith; we all live here in brotherhood," he wrote.

In "Atmopadesa Śatakam" [ആത്മോപദേശശതകം],

> "Acts that one performs for one's own sake
> Should also aim for the good of other men"

He opposed caste more than religion. When Sahodaran Ayyappan told him that he joined 'Buddhism' in a particular context, Guru Devan responded with a smile, "Didn't you give up 'caste'?" That's acceptable. Caste should not exist anywhere.

On another occasion, a disciple asked Guru:

"According to Smṛti, Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas, and Śūdras must each use different types of soil to perform purification rituals."

To this, Guru replied:

"Even if you purify according to Smṛti, don't forget to use firewood from the Śruti!"

This response is deceptively light-hearted, yet it is highly tactical. The disciple attempts to legitimise caste hierarchy through the doctrinal authority of Manusmṛti. Guru's reply, however, uses linguistic irony to unseat that authority.

He equates śaucam (ritual purity) with burning firewood and makes the point that the mere external application of scriptural rules (Smṛti) is meaningless unless accompanied by an internal transformation carried out by Śruti (revealed knowledge, often associated with the Vedas). In this way, Guru critiques the ritualistic absolutism of caste-based purity. He does so by fusing spiritual logic with humour. His target is not the disciple, but the hierarchical hegemony of religious knowledge systems.

Another famous example of this critical stance comes from Guru's reply to a question regarding the disposal of corpses:

"Should we cremate, bury, or perform a funeral as per tradition?"

Guru responded:

"Wouldn't it be best to grind the corpse into fertiliser and use it for agriculture?"

This sharp-witted answer critiques both ritual orthodoxy and social sentimentality. But the real punch lies in what follows:

Disciple: "Oh no, that's unpleasant."

Guru: "What is the problem? Does it hurt?"

Here, Guru satirises not only religious ritualism but also the emotional romanticism that surrounds it. The disciple's sentiment is rooted in cultural conservatism, but Guru's response is rooted in material critique; even the dead body must serve the living, he suggests.

The clash here is between modern rational critique and traditionalist religious feeling. Guru's discourse enters the very fault line that separates these worldviews, using laughter not to evade, but to restructure meaning. Here, he doesn't simply reject Smṛti or Śruti as scriptures. He critiques the sanctification of hierarchy that arises through their misinterpretation and misuse. His humour dislodges the structures that appear sacred but are in fact deeply oppressive.

There is yet another instance when a disciple told Guru:

"Someone said, if all the people in the country spit at once, every white man in India would drown."

Guru smiled and replied:

"Yes, if they really did spit, they might drown. But the problem is, when they see a white man, their mouths dry up!"

This quip brilliantly captures the psychological contradiction behind colonial obedience. On the surface, the disciple is expressing a nationalist sentiment, a symbolic overthrow of British rule. But Guru's response targets a deeper issue: internalised subjugation. Here, spitting becomes a metaphor, not just a rejection or protest, but a symbolic, potential resistance that is never realised. Guru acknowledges, through the colonial critique, how it fails to undermine the possibility of effective rebellion by exposing the emotional submission of the subaltern experience, which has disabled physical action.

This is a moment of internal self-questioning and the search for authentic roots. Guru's remark demonstrates exactly that. Through satire, he exposes the emptiness of bravado in nationalist rhetoric that lacks the courage for actual confrontation. The disposition (vṛtti) Guru challenges here is the dependency (paratantratā) embedded in the native psyche. He recognises that true resistance requires not just the rejection of colonial power but the dismantling of mental structures of obedience. Thus, through a simple exchange about spitting, Guru explores the deep contradictions in Indian nationalist discourse, where outrage exists, but action fails. His discourse is not against a revolution or catching slogans; it is a plea for liberation through his inner clarity and humour which becomes the instrument of change in the social setup.

Guru's direct speech springs from his observations on human nature and ethics. His analogy comparing love and compassion to eating a thorny fish, consuming the flesh while skillfully avoiding the bones, remains one of the most often quoted metaphors. With this everyday image, he communicated the profound ethical lesson that one must focus on the good in others while carefully avoiding their faults. The message, though deeply philosophical, was delivered in the form of a wise conversation, intimately familiar to his audience, ensuring it remembered and lived. Passed from generation to generation.

In his literary works, particularly Jati Lakshana and Jati Nirnayam, Guru employed a similarly direct style to dismantle caste hierarchies. In Jati Mimamsa, he asks a disarmingly simple question: "Will a child come out of the womb marked by caste?" This plain inquiry stripped the caste system of its religious and social justifications, exposing it as a human construct rather than a hierarchical order. The clarity and simplicity of the question allowed no escape into philosophical abstraction; it forced society to face its own prejudices.

His conversational style was equally impactful when addressing issues of ritual purity. Referring to the emphasis on caste-based kitchen practices, he questioned, "Does the food know its caste?" This rhetorical question was designed not just to ridicule meaningless rituals but to bring the listener into face-to-face confrontation with the illogical nature of such divisions. It transformed philosophical critique into accessible social commentary.

One day, Sree Narayana Guru was resting under the shade of a jackfruit tree (pilāvu) when a disciple approached, and Guru asked:

"Why are there no jackfruits on this tree this year?"

The disciple replied:

"Last year, there were too many. Even the smallest branches bore fruit. We offered a lot in charity as well."

Guru responded with a smile:

"Then perhaps it won't bear fruit this year; you've attained mokṣa through your dharma, haven't you?"

In this seemingly light-hearted exchange, Guru creates a simile between jackfruit (representing worldly life) and mokṣa (liberation). This form of symbolic refiguration (rūpakavathkaraṇam) allows material, natural objects like jackfruit to stand in for spiritual goals like liberation, thereby bringing them into the realm of critique and reconsideration. Jackfruit, a tangible, perishable fruit, is used to symbolise ephemeral worldly existence. In contrast, mokṣa is treated as eternal and transcendental. In both being juxtaposed, Guru does not merely draw a humorous comparison. He produces an oppositional meaning structure, an antithetical metaphor (rūpakadvandvam) that questions the supposed transcendence of mokṣa itself.

By bringing together jackfruit and moksha in a single act of his speech, Guru builds a linguistic tension that exposes the paradoxes of conventional religious thought. This is not just creating humour for amusement, as the joke carries deep philosophical insight. It critiques the idea that renunciation automatically yields transcendence and suggests that such metaphysical narratives are often built on fragile foundations. Moreover, the humour here is not superficial; it is a critical tool used to destabilise traditional narratives of virtue and reward. Simile transforms to satire, where jackfruit becomes metaphor; Moksha becomes question; and Guru becomes the chikitsakan (healer) wielding irony as a scalpel.

In 1927, while Guru was resting at Śivagiri, two foreigners arrived with the goal of converting him to Christianity. The following is the brief conversation that ensued:

Foreigner: "Swami, you should convert to Christianity."

Guru: "How old are you now?"

Foreigner: "Thirty."

Guru (smiling): "Well, we were already in Christianity before you were even born."

This exchange is not just humorous; it is deeply symbolic. Guru distinguishes between Kristu (Christ) and Kristumatam (Christian religion), identifying a spiritual continuity that preceded organised religions. His words challenged the assumption that Christianity arrived in India only through Western missionaries. He implies in his remark that the ethical and liberative dimensions of Christ have

long been present in Indian spiritual life, independent of colonial structures. Guru critiques the epistemic violence of missionary efforts, which often masked cultural domination as salvation. Organised religion has been presented as a liberatory escape from caste-based oppression. But Guru points out the illusion behind that promise. This dialogue also reveals a parallel drawn between Christ and Guru as both subverted dominant theological and political systems of their time. Both overturned aesthetic norms, challenged historical narratives, and spoke truth to those in power. They both redefined the Sacred, from within and outside the structures that claimed its preservation.

Guru's thought aligns with liberation theology, a theory of resistance and justice, but one that does not endorse organised conversion as the solution. Rather, it recognises the inner values of spiritual struggle. His vāda (argument) is not against Christ, but against the colonial modernist tendency for the manipulative use of the name of Christ. It is a paradoxical engagement, simultaneously respectful of divine universality yet sharply critical of its political appropriation. Thus, Guru's discourse embodies what we may call subversive theology: the divine is embraced, and the doctrinal is resisted. In doing so, Guru reclaims religious and ethical language for indigenous philosophical sovereignty.

Sree Narayana Guru once stated:

"Just as darkness disappears when the sun rises, ignorance disappears when knowledge (a̲rivu) dawns."

At first glance, this might seem like a straightforward metaphor. However, within its outer simplicity lies the inner complexity. The phrase "knowledge dawns" suggests that a̲rivu Knowledge comes from above, descending upon the ignorant. This mirrors the colonial epistemology, the idea that knowledge is possessed by the coloniser and is gifted to the colonised. According to this logic, ignorance (ajñānam) existed until Western enlightenment brought clarity, order, and "civilisation." But the actual meaning Guru communicates through this epigram is different.

Guru's statement can thus be misread as reflecting the colonial mimicry of enlightenment. In truth, Guru was deeply aware of the limitations of this framework. His own discourse constantly pointed toward a more nuanced understanding of knowledge, not as bestowed from above, but arising from the lived experience, critical introspection, and cultural memory.

The danger, however, lies in how colonial knowledge systems tried to claim ownership over all knowledge. They denied the indigenous approach addressing the status of "real" knowledge, treating local wisdom as myth, superstition, or, at best, folk tradition. This colonial knowledge model maintained a subconscious belief: that knowledge must come from the outside world, from the superior rationality of the West. This belief is manifested in slogans like:

"When knowledge rises, darkness disappears."

"When impurity leaves, sanctity enters."

"When tradition fades, reform begins."

Such ideas saturate even today's adhinivēśādhunikatā (colonial modernity). Guru's statement, however, should not be reduced to such binaries. His works repeatedly dismantle the very notion that light comes only from above or

that prākṛta (natural/local) must yield to parivartana (reform).

Yet, certain moments in his discourse reflect certain ambivalence, where the colonial notion of "enlightenment" seeps in. Consider Guru's remark:

"We must pray for the victory of the English. It was they who gave us sannyāsa (renunciation)."

He adds:

"In Rāma's time, Śūdras weren't even allowed to renounce. Hindus only live by the Smṛtis. But the English gave us freedom to renounce, so aren't they our true gurus?"

This may sound like gratitude toward colonial rulers. But it is better read as ironic provocation, a way to highlight how colonial structures, while oppressive, inadvertently disrupted native orthodoxy, thus creating unintentional spaces of reform. Guru's tone does not celebrate the coloniser. Instead, it shows the contradictions of liberation within subjugation. The śāstā (governor) may appear as the liberator, but that only reveals the hollowness of the system from which such "liberation" becomes possible.

Guru also used plain speech to instruct on ethical living. He once remarked, "Cleanliness starts from the kitchen." Though simple, this statement reflects a profound connection between everyday habits and spiritual discipline. It illustrated Guru's belief that true spirituality manifests not in temples or rituals but in daily actions and personal discipline. Moreover, his plain speech carried subtle humor and wit, making his critiques memorable without antagonizing his audience. His ability to laugh at human follies while pointing out their dangers made his teachings appealing and non-threatening, encouraging introspection rather than defensiveness. These examples collectively illustrate that Guru's plain speech was a deliberate philosophical method and a tool for social reform.

2.3.3 Humor and Satire as Components of Plain Speech

Similarly, Guru's humorous approach to untouchability and purity is evident in another well-documented instance where he challenged the contradictions of ritualistic practices. When people were concerned about the purity of a sacred well, which was protected from being touched by the low-caste, other than Brahmins, he remarked, "The well is untouchable, but is the water also untouchable?" This simple but pointed question ridiculed the caste-based obsession with purity, using humor to disarm prejudice and encourage rational thought. The underlying irony and gentle mockery made it impossible to ignore the contradiction in believing that inanimate objects could have caste distinctions.

Another example of Guru's use of satire in speech occurred when he was asked why he, as a spiritual leader, did not wear a sacred thread (symbolising the "twice-born" status of the Brahmin class). Instead of entering into a long debate, he laughed and asked whether wearing a thread could make a person truly wise or virtuous. This rhetorical and humorous response revealed the hollowness of caste-based symbols, emphasizing that true wisdom and righteousness do not come from external marks but from the inner realisation.

Guru also used humor when commenting on the superstition and blind faith in rituals. He once observed that if caste were truly determined by birth, then even a cow

giving birth in a Brahmin household should be considered a Brahmin! This remark, though lighthearted, served to expose the irrationality of caste distinctions based solely on lineage. The underlying satire challenged the very foundation of varna-based social discrimination, encouraging people to question rather than blindly accept traditions.

His humor extended beyond caste issues to broader aspects of human behavior and spirituality. When discussing religious disputes and sectarian conflicts, he wittily remarked, "No matter which God you pray to, hunger and thirst remain the same." With this single sentence, Guru reduced religious superiority complexes to their basic human realities, making people realise that common human needs transcend sectarian divisions. This subtle yet impactful humor deflated religious arrogance and emphasized the universal nature of human suffering and fulfillment.

One of the key reasons why Guru's use of humor was so effective was that it never came across as mockery or insult. He did not aim to demean or belittle anyone but rather to gently awaken the mind. His wit was a tool of enlightenment rather than mere amusement. It created a space where even those who disagreed with him were forced to smile and reflect, making his philosophy more persuasive and accessible. In essence, Guru's humor and satire were not separate from his spiritual and reformist mission; they were an integral part of his method of teaching, guiding, and transforming the society.

2.3.4 Sree Narayana Guru's Use of Local Idiom and Folklore in Plain Speech and Writings

Plain Speech Rooted in Daily Life

By grounding the critique in an everyday familiar experience (for example, every baby is born the same), the Guru made a radical point accessible to ordinary people. This preference for plain, "low - vernacular" Malayalam (pacha Malayalam) is noted by critics: Guru proved that even the subtlest philosophical ideas could be conveyed in clear everyday Malayalam without loss of depth

His writing demonstrates that vernacular speech can carry the weight of scripture, thus inviting all – not just the Sanskrit-educated elite – into the dialogue.

Notable examples of Guru's ground-the-earth, idiomatic wit in conversation include:

Unity in Diversity (Nature Analogy): When Mahatma Gandhi argued that a caste-less world was impossible – pointing to a free man in Sivagiri Mutt (Hermitage) with the remark, "Even the leaves of the same tree differ"—Narayana Guru quietly replied, "If these leaves are crushed to extract their juice, the taste of it will be the same," illustrating that similarity is the essence behind peripheral differences.

This self-evident experiment with tree leaves distilled from his philosophy of oneness into a tangible lesson anyone could grasp was what led the Mahatma to arrive at a conclusion that caste discrimination shall perish.

Questioning Ritual Taboo: Asked by a judge whether burial or cremation was the proper way to dispose of a corpse, Guru quipped, "Crush them in an oil press; they'll make good manure." When the appalled judge flinched, the Guru smiled and asked, "Why? Will it hurt (the dead body)?"

Through this, Guru was joking

about the use of a quotidian oil press on a corpse. Guru cut a rent through the religious dogma with his built-inward-farmyard pragmatism, implying that after death the body is mere insignificant and discarded matter. The absurd image also jolted listeners to rethink undue reverence for rituals.

Challenging Social Customs with Common Chores: An orthodox elder once complained that young men were defying tradition by shaving their own faces (a task traditionally done by barbers of a particular caste). Guru's retort was as blunt as it was humorous: "Don't they wash themselves after defecation? … Is shaving more demeaning than washing your bottoms?"

By comparing shaving to an everyday hygienic act everyone does for themselves, he used a coarse domestic reference to expose the foolishness of caste rules. Such plain talk—invoking the most unglamorous of daily routines—instantly leveled the conversation. It brought lofty social norms down to the reality of everyone's household life, effectively democratizing the debate on dignity and self-reliance.

During the Vaikom Satyagraha, a disciple informed Guru that a man named Thaccan had walked through a restricted temple path in the company of a British officer (Kottaṉ Sāyippu). Though the Dalit defiled the temple path, violating the caste restriction, the upper castes raised no objection due to the fear of the British officer's authority.

On hearing this, Guru remarked:

"When cowhide touches your foot, you're not allowed into the temple. But if that same hide becomes part of a drum, there's no objection to taking it inside. So the British rule has brought some good things too."

This is a brilliant metaphor, wrapped in irony. Guru constructs a symbolic system where the cowhide (tōl) refers to Dalit identity, historically seen as polluting and untouchable the drum (ceṇṭa) signifies a transformed object, now sanctified and acceptable within the temple premises.

The British officer becomes the powerful enabler of this symbolic reversal, his presence making the entry of the Dalit neglected or tolerated.

Here, Guru does not intend to praise colonialism. Instead, he is exposing the absurdities of social and ritual norms. The very same material, hide, is rejected when it represents a body but accepted when it becomes an object to observe some ritual.

This objectification of the subaltern is central to adhinivēśādhunikatā (colonial modernity). The colonisers often narrated native inequalities, dramatized their injustices, and then positioned themselves as the agents of redemption. Guru critiques this process, whereby the liberation of the oppressed is shown as possible under colonial patronage. He also acknowledges the paradox involved in this process, that British rule, despite its imperialist intent, unintentionally disrupted native orthodoxy. Guru does not endorse colonialism but attempts to show how even Western interventions marked a shift in power dynamics, especially when local structures are too rigid to reform themselves and require forces from outside to create fear in them through the alternate exercise of power, though at the cost of suppression and exploitation. The statement is not an endorsement. It is a discursive trial. Guru uses colonial iconography to critique both the helplessness of native orthodoxy and the hypocrisy of religious exclusion.

The statement is not an endorsement. It is a discursive trick; Guru uses colonial iconography to critique both the impotence of native reform and the hypocrisy of religious exclusion.

This is the aesthetics of contradiction, where liberation and irony.

There is yet another interesting dialogue on the caste theme.

While travelling by train from Tṛśśivapērūr to Kōzhikkōṭ, Sree Narayana Guru had a conversation with a local king:

Rāja: "What is your name?"

Guru: "Nārāyaṇan."

Rāja: "Which caste do you belong to?"

Guru (smiling gently): "Can't you tell it by look?"

Rāja: "No, I can't."

Guru: "If you can't tell it by looking, how could you possibly know it by hearing?"

This sharp and subtle exchange goes beyond a personal encounter. It reveals the deeply engrained structure of caste, rooted in the gaze (nōṭṭam) and Guru's authority to question its logic.

Guru's response unravels the logic of caste by challenging the premise of knowledge through vision, a gaze that claims to know and categorise by appearance. His rhetorical question turns the assumption back on itself: if the look cannot reveal caste, how can hearing, a mediated form of knowing, succeed?

The visionary critiques the paurastyavādam (orientalism) underlying caste, the appearance that brands indigenous people as the other through hierarchical imagery. As Edward Said noted, orientalist discourse divides humanity along the lines of knowledge and biology, separating the West and East not only in intellect but in essence.

Guru identifies that the gaze of the Āryans turned natives into asuras, vānaras, and rākṣasas, while colonisers presented themselves as gods and messianic figures. This symbolic transformation forms the cultural unconscious of the Indian caste system.

Over time, these views were sanctified through scripture and pedagogy. Guru's method is to gently dislodge this sanctity through laughter. When the king says, "No," and Guru asks, "Then how could you know by hearing?", the epistemological core of caste begins to wobble.

Guru is not merely rejecting caste through ideology; he is dismantling it through a semiotic intervention, questioning the very foundation of how knowledge is created, maintained, and weaponised. If the gaze is false, then all the knowledge built upon it is also unstable. In that moment, vision itself becomes a myth, and Guru exposes it as such.

Through these examples, we see Guru's tact of embedding wisdom in ordinary imagery. Bathing, eating, bodily functions, farming – no aspect of daily life was too humble to serve as a teaching tool. This colloquial style wasn't a lack of erudition (Guru was well-versed in Sanskrit philosophy); it was a conscious strategy to make spiritual and moral insight feel like a common experience. Listeners chuckled at the directness of his idioms, but the laughter opened for them a world of deeper reflection. In short, Narayana Guru's plain speech bridged the gap between the scholarly and the low-vernacular speakers – interpreting high philosophy in the language of the

peasants and the household so that even the unlettered could absorb it. As one commentator noted, his "humour was underpinned by compassion" and keen social insight, proving that simple human qualities like a good laugh can convey profound truth.

2.3.5 Temple Access and the Vaikom Satyagraha: Speaking Against Caste Barriers

Decades later, during the Vaikom Satyagraha of 1924–25 (a campaign to open public roads near the Vaikom temple to all castes), Sree Narayana Guru gave his blessings as a guiding light. While he stayed behind the scenes, his spirit of plainspoken truth guided the satyagrahis. An anecdote from this scene shows Guru's mixture of common sense and wit: When told of Gandhi's advice that protesters should endure beatings without retaliation, Guru said jokingly that they should keep a stout stick handy – not to attack, but to offer it to the police so that the policemen "should not lack it" to beat the protestors. In one ironic stroke, he highlighted the moral high ground of non-violence while mocking the oppressor's brutality.

Guru's simplicity cut through caste dogmas even in his childhood. In a traditional village school, young Narayana (Nanu) was once ordered to sit on a lower seat made of a palm leaf mat, since higher wooden benches were reserved for upper-caste pupils. He obeyed without protest but innocently asked the teacher, "From which side should we take our breath?"

The embarrassed teacher had no answer – the question revealed that air has no caste divisions, so why should seating? By such plain logic, Guru dismantled caste segregation with no need for lengthy arguments. His valuable words – from "our Shiva" at Aruvippuram consecration to analogies about fish and breathing – carried the power of spiritual truth expressed through everyday wisdom, which helped a lot to scatter light during the temple entry struggle. They reassured the oppressed that divine and human rights belonged to all and even influenced orthodox minds to reconsider the unjust traditions.

2.3.6 Advocacy of Cleanliness and Everyday Dignity

Cleanliness and hygiene were another practical arena where Guru's simple speech forwarded social reform. He observed that one cynical pretext for untouchability was the claim that lower castes were "impure" or unclean. Instead of condemning this prejudice only through words, Guru urged people to defeat it through everyday habits. He would ask pointedly, "Would anyone dare to tell a man who is clean to give way?" implying that if people kept themselves and their surroundings truly clean, the very basis for calling them "untouchable" would vanish. "Cleanliness must be strictly followed. Untouchability will automatically be dispelled," he advised, the simple folk explaining the cause and effect rather than abstract generalisations.

Guru often spoke about cleanliness in down-to-earth terms so that any household could practice it. He clearly told them that even religion should start from personal hygiene: "Toilet is important; everyone should take a bath in the morning... If there is purity of body, there will be purity of food, home, and all else. If that is done, man can do everything."

By linking morning baths and clean kitchens to one's capability to "do everything," Guru opened a path, based on common sense, leading to dignity. In conversation, he half-jokingly suggested

the formation of a new "congregation" called "the bathing group," since external cleanliness would lead to inner purity and social well-being. Behind the gentle humor was a serious message: cleanliness drives away disease, ignorance, and the stigma of impurity. Guru's plain instruction – start with a bath and a clean home – carried deep reformative intent. It empowered the marginalized to claim respect through simple improvements in daily life. In essence, he turned cleanliness into a social equalizer, preaching that outer purity would foster self-respect and erode caste taboos from within. This pragmatic approach bridged high philosophy (the idea of inner purity) with an ordinary morning routine, exemplifying how Guru translated vision into action through plain speech.

2.3.7 Education and Enlightenment Through Simple Words

Education was the core of Sree Narayana Guru's reform agenda, and he spoke about it in straightforward maxims that linked learning to freedom. He taught that ignorance was the first obstacle holding people down and thus exhorted them, "Be enlightened by knowledge." Unlike many traditional gurus, he did not hide knowledge in esoteric language. Instead, he encouraged even the poorest to seek practical education in order to uplift themselves. Guru often contrasted mere bookish learning with useful knowledge in pithy phrases. Once, watching students studying only poetry and classical literature, he gently chided them: "If you study poetry, you can tell the meaning; if you study medicine, you will gain meaning."

In other words, literary study might make one able to explain things, but scientific or technical study (like medicine) would give one the power to do things meaningful to society. In one simple comparison, Guru drove home the value of practical education for a purposeful life. Guru led the movement, establishing schools alongside temples realising that spiritual progress went hand-in-hand with learning. He succinctly puts it "Wealth becomes learning, [and] vidya (knowledge) becomes social service."

On one occasion, after giving a sum of money to support a disciple's studies, he explained that in investing resources in education, we expect a payback not just in personal advancement alone but in service to the community. Such plainspoken wisdom – linking wealth, knowledge, and service – made abstract ideals tangible for his followers. Indeed, Guru believed the ultimate aim of his movement was to ensure everyone had the circumstances to "live as human beings alike," and he viewed temples mere "decorations" for schools in the grand scheme. This perspective, communicated in everyday language, helped ordinary people see education as their true liberator, not freedom of worship alone.

It was under Guru's guidance that the motto "liberation through education" (Vidya kondu swathanthraravuka) became the strongest pillar of the Kerala renaissance. By repeatedly highlighting the power of knowledge in simple terms, Guru bridged the gap between spiritual enlightenment and worldly progress. His sayings on education turned into mantras for self-empowerment, violating caste lines and inspiring marginalized communities to open schools of their own, read widely, and acquire modern skills as vehicles for working out their own emancipation.

2.3.8 Inter-Dining and Casteless Brotherhood

One of Sree Narayana Guru's most socially audacious moves was promoting inter-dining – people of different castes eating together – to break caste barriers. Here again, he deployed plain logic and common-sense morality to make his point. As early as 1917, when his disciple Sahodaran Ayyappan organized a "Misra Bhojan" (Banquet of people belonging to mixed castes), Guru backed it with a simple yet sweeping statement: "Whatever may be the difference in men's creed, dress, or language, since they all belong to the same kind of creation, there is no harm in dining together or marrying each other."

In Malayalam, he expressed this as "yāthoru bhēdam ullathengilum, oru jātiyil ulla manusyar "anu"—despite external differences, all humans are one in caste. This accessible proclamation, "Their caste is one," gave a clear ethical basis for social mixing. It framed interdining not as a radical act but as a natural extension of the truth that we are one human family.

Guru not only preached this in words but also put it into practice and blessed others who did so. In 1927, he presided over a marriage between a Keralite groom (belonging to an oppressed community) and a European woman named Margaret. When the groom's family objected to it due to violation of social code, the Guru reminded them of his message: differences in attire, race, or nationality do not matter because all humans are of one caste. He saw "no harm in marrying one another" and dining together "across such outward differences."

The marriage went ahead under Guru's leadership, symbolising the breaking of both caste and racial barriers of societal life. Guru's straightforward words had paved the way for this union by focusing on basic human oneness instead of complex racial distinctions. He composed a devotional stanza after consecrating Lord Shiva in Aruvippuram in 1888, "Jati-bhedha matadwesham illaathe…" (Where caste differences or religious hatred do not exist, and all live in brotherhood), which became a popular prayer. Through such verses accessible to all, Narayana Guru made the idea of brotherhood and stripping caste away from the public conscience.

By reducing lofty ideals of equality to the tangible act of sharing a meal, Guru connected hearts and stomachs! Inter-dining, in Guru's vision, was not just a political statement but a matter of common sense and courtesy – people eating the same food together because fundamentally nothing separated them. This plain approach emboldened other reformers in Kerala to host intercaste feasts and encourage "panthibhojanam." It influenced temple entry activists and organizations like the SNDP (which Guru founded) to emphasize social integration at the community level. Guru's straightforward pronouncements on unity provided a moral foundation for later egalitarian movements, making caste-free dining and even inter-caste marriage seem like normal, ethical choices rooted in the shared essence of humanity

2.3.9 Women's Upliftment and Social Common Sense

Guru's reform efforts also extended to the upliftment of women, articulated in the same simple and sensible manner. He recognized that many customs of his time unjustly burdened women, and he used plain speech to challenge these practices. For example, Guru opposed the ritual of kettu kalyanam – a form of child marriage or mock-marriage ceremony that

prevailed in some communities – which robbed young girls of a normal childhood. In one recorded incident, Guru arrived at a household where such a child marriage was about to occur. Instead of a grand philosophical lecture, he gave practical advice to the family: "It's not necessary to get [her] married so young. We have often told people, but none have listened so far. I'm saying it for your own good – if you trust my word, you must stop this and simply hold a feast."

His direct appeal – to end the harmful custom and eat together happily—had its positive results in the household. They immediately called off the ceremony, and the head of the family even vowed not to conduct such marriages in the future. Here Guru's plain speech protected a girl's welfare by pening a cutting edge in the superstition with reason and compassion to invite a healthy outcome of good sense for the child's own good.

Sree Narayana Guru's views on equality inherently included women's equality. He taught that birth and biology do not determine a person's worth – a truth that resonates for gender equality just as it does for caste. His rhetorical question from Jati Mimamsa, "Will a child come out of the womb marked by caste?" also underscores that every child (girl or boy) is born without labels and deserves the same human dignity. Guru honored women as embodiments of the divine mother (he consecrated the goddess of knowledge Sarada Devi in Sarada Temple, Sivagiri, in 1912), implicitly acknowledging women's role in education and culture.

In his everyday interactions, Guru showed great respect to women devotees and often urged families to educate their daughters just as their sons. He used to say that a mother's influence on the child is the first school of values. Though not given to overt feminist reviews by today's standards, Guru's rational pronouncements curtailed many of the practices that restricted women. He supported widows who chose to remarry and strove to empower them to break the taboos, like the prohibition imposed on the low-caste women covering their breasts (a major issue in Kerala in the 19th century), by promoting the idea that honour and clothing are a person's personal right connected to dignity and liberty.

Through simple directives—"donot marry off children too early," "let women study and lead," and "treat women as you would treat any other human"—Narayana Guru redefined women's position in society. His style was to appeal to the people's conscience in an uncomplicated way: if something brings no real harm and increases someone else's dignity, why not do it? This practical ethics helped the Kerala society gradually discard various unjust practices imposed upon women. Many later reformers (like Ayyankali and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay in Kerala) who worked for women's education, movements for widow remarriage, and rights of lower-caste women drew inspiration from the foundation of social common sense that Guru had built up.

His plain speech plowed the ground for the upliftment to materialize, which was not a radical or "Western" idea but a great reform initiative based on the ideology of universal brotherhood, which sprung from our own culture, spreading the realisation that all multiplicity is the fall from one.

2.3.10 Bridging Spiritual Vision and Practical Reform

Sree Narayana Guru's use of plain speech was one of the key factors in bridging his high spiritual vision with the down-to-earth philosophy for a total

social change. As a saint, Guru was well-versed in Sanskrit scriptures and Advaita philosophy, but he deliberately "stooped to the low level of the majority of his followers." Brought them up gradually by allowing them to digest his philosophy little by little.

He translated the essence of Advaita (which teaches the non-duality) into the everyday principle of human equality. By phrasing profound truths in homely language, he ensured that philosophy did not remain confined to books or ashrams but entered kitchens, schools, and streets. His sayings carried the weight of wisdom but were so easy to remember, like folk proverbs. For instance, "Whatever the religion, it suffices if it makes a better man" was one of Guru's assurances—a simple statement dissolving religious rivalry in favour of basic morality. Likewise, when he said, "Ask not, say not, think not caste," he was effectively turning the spiritual ideal of realising the divine presence in everyone into a practical rule to be followed in daily life (i.e., to completely ignore caste distinctions in thought, word, and deed). Such maxims helped lay people align their actions with the spiritual ideal of oneness without any need for a theological foundation.

Guru's plain speech not only educated and empowered the marginalized but also impressed and influenced other leaders and movements across India. Mahatma Gandhi, who met Sree Narayana Guru in 1925, was astonished by Guru's sweet mingling of spirituality and social reform. Gandhi praised Guru for challenging caste "without resorting to violence or aggressive confrontation" and admired how the Guru's personal example and words moved people's hearts. In fact, Gandhi often quoted Guru's slogan "One Caste, One Religion, One God for Man" as an exemplary call for unity and human dignity. The Guru's emphasis on self-purification and truth as means to end untouchability resonated with Gandhi's own methods. It is telling that during the Vaikom Satyagraha, Gandhi sought Guru's counsel – a sign that Guru's straightforward messaging had provided an ethical blueprint for the campaign.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, though he never met Guru, later operated with a similar insight that social equality must be claimed by the oppressed themselves through education and self-respect. Scholars note that Ambedkar's and Guru's approaches were parallel streams – Ambedkar fought legally and politically, while Guru worked at the level of consciousness – but both strove for the same goal of ending caste injustice. Ambedkar's followers in Kerala acknowledged that Guru had prepared the ground by encouraging lower castes to seek education, reject social stigma, and gain self-confidence long before legal reforms came. In this sense, Guru's plainspoken teachings anticipated and influenced the broader anti-caste movement in India.

Within Kerala, a whole generation of reformers and poets (Kumaran Asan, T.K. Madhavan, K. Ayyappan, C. Kesavan, and others) were directly inspired by Gurudevan's words. They carried his messages to more people, often echoing his easy style. For example, Sahodaran Ayyappan's popular slogan "Jati nashtam" (annihilate caste) and his advocacy of mixed dining were a continuation of Guru's dictum that "caste is one." The Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936, which opened Travancore temples to all castes, was the culmination of decades of awareness that Guru's movement had created. As generally agreed, Narayana Guru brought the essence of the Vedas to the common man by speaking in the people's language and thereby sowing seeds for a peaceful social revolution to

spark.

His life spreads the message that enlightenment is not true enlightenment if it cannot be communicated simply and used to uplift society. Sree Narayana Guru's plain speech served as the bridge between his spiritual vision and the immediate social reforms of his time. Whether he was addressing untouchability, illiteracy, or women's oppression, he chose words and examples drawn from daily life and elemental truths – be it bathing in the morning, sharing a meal, or recognizing a mother's love – to convey values of equality, compassion, and self-improvement. These unadorned words carried a profound moral authority. He humanized abstract principles, making it possible for an oppressed toddy tapper, a peasant woman, or a student to practice those teachings in their own life. The dignity and common sense in Guru's language galvanized a mass movement without anger or estrangement.

2.3.11 Reflections in Kerala's Education, Public Discourse, and Media Today

Guru's plain-speaking legacy, deeply woven into Kerala's modern identity is visibly reflected in the existing education system, public discourse, and media.

Education: Kerala has formally recognized the importance of Guru's teachings by incorporating them into school and college curricula. In 2012, for example, the state announced that the "vision of Sree Narayana Guru would be introduced in the school syllabi" for the ensuing academic year. Today, Malayalam and social studies textbooks include Guru's life and messages – such as the values of brotherhood, moral living, and social equality he championed. Educators use his simple maxims (like "Ask not, think not, say not caste") to instill humanitarian values in students. This presence in the curriculum reflects a consensus that Kerala's next generation should learn in the plain idiom of Guru about the ills of caste and the need for unity. When the Chief Minister of Kerala affirmed while inaugurating the 80th annual Sivagiri pilgrimage that the future will be "fruitful only if the new generation [embraces] the teachings of Gurudevan," his stress was on education and ethical living. Unsurprisingly enough, numerous schools and colleges are named after Sree Narayana Guru, and institutions like the Sreenarayanaguru Open University carry forward his universal vision in the state.

Public Discourse: In the civic and political spheres of Kerala, references to Narayana Guru and quotes of his sayings are commonplace, underlining how integral his plain-spoken ideals remain. Leaders of all communities pay homage to Guru's philosophy in their speeches – not only on his birth anniversary but whenever questions of social justice arise. The annual Sivagiri pilgrimage (Sivagiri Theerthadanam), established by Guru, has become a high-profile event where officials and citizens alike reflect on his message.

In 2019, India's Vice President, while inaugurating the 87th Sivagiri pilgrimage, explicitly invoked Guru's maxim of "Liberation, Strength through Organization, Economic Prosperity through Industry," urging society to follow these principles, which transcend his time. He understands the importance of Guru's teachings, which continue to remain with significant contemporary relevance" for promoting social justice. In the same spirit, Kerala politicians often invoke Guru during debates on caste and religion – as seen recently when they cited

Guru's maxim "one caste, one religion" to defend the misuse of the term Sanatana Dharma in politics. Such examples show that Guru's straightforward calls for unity, anti-casteism, and religious harmony are still unquestioned guidelines in public discourse to set standards for evaluating many of the present-day policies. The moral authority of his simple words—standing above partisan divides – continues to unite Keralites when confronting social issues.

Media: Kerala's media (print, television, and digital) frequently reflects Guru's legacy, underscoring how his plain style and ideas resonate in daily conversation. Major newspapers publish editorials and reflections on Guru's relevance, often around his birth and death anniversaries. These writings commonly quote his aphorisms in Malayalam – for instance, "Oru Jati, Oru Matham, Oru Daivam Manushyanu" (One Caste, One Religion, One God for Man)—to comment on current affairs ranging from communal harmony to caste-based reservation.

Journalists often describe contemporary events in the light of Guru's vision; e.g., an article might praise an interfaith initiative by echoing Guru's teaching, "Whichever the religion, it suffices if it makes a better man". In popular culture and media, Guru's life has been portrayed in documentaries and films (his biographical film Yugapurushan requires mention), bringing his simple dialogues to the screen. Even social media in Kerala focuses on the quotes of Guru to make them trending during times of social debates, showing the grassroots appeal of his words. Importantly, many media outlets laud Guru's humour and plain wisdom – such as his quip "Ask the fish!" when queried about the caste of fish in a temple pond – as part of Kerala's cultural heritage of satire and reason.

As a columnist once reflected, "His rational, secular, spiritual message reached out not just to Ezhavas but to all people—one caste, one religion, one God for man; whatever one's religion, it's sufficient if it makes a better man." This acknowledgment by media of Guru's unifying messages affirms that his plain style of communication has subtly set the tone for Kerala's public conversations, which tend to value logic, inclusiveness, and simplicity over sectarian rhetoric. In short, whether in a TV debate or a Facebook post, invoking Guru has become the shorthand for invoking clarity, compassion, and common sense in Kerala's social narrative.

2.3.12 Plain Speech as a Philosophical and Reformist Strategy

Sree Narayana Guru's embrace of plain, direct speech was not simply a stylistic choice but a profound philosophical stance and a deliberate reformist strategy. In an era where knowledge was often mystified, cloaked in ritualistic complexity, and confined to the privileged few, Guru's decision to speak and write in simple, accessible language represented a radical break from tradition. It was, above all, an ethical and political act, a conscious effort to democratize knowledge and dismantle the hierarchies of language, caste, and learning that defined his time.

The power structures Guru confronted were deeply entrenched. Sanskrit, while revered as the language of sacred knowledge and philosophical inquiry, remained beyond the reach of the majority. The Brahminical elite used it as both a medium and a weapon to preserve their monopoly over spiritual and intellectual life. Ordinary people, deprived of access to scriptures and philosophical texts,

remained dependent on intermediaries, priests and scholars, whose interpretations often served to reinforce caste hierarchies and social divisions.

Against this backdrop, Guru's preference for clarity, simplicity, and accessibility was revolutionary. He believed that spiritual truths are universal and self-evident; they do not require elaborate verbal ornamentation or esoteric symbolism to be valid. For Guru, the truest expression of wisdom lies in its ability to reach and transform the common person, to touch the lives of farmers, laborers, and housewives as much as it speaks to scholars and philosophers.

By choosing plain speech, Guru rejected the elitist belief that wisdom and philosophy were the preserve of those trained in intricate dialectics or scholastic traditions. He understood that mystification of knowledge serves only to exclude and alienate, while simplicity enables inclusion. His democratic vision of knowledge insisted that every human being, regardless of birth, caste, or education, had the right to access and understand the highest truths of existence.

Moreover, Guru's plain speech was not devoid of depth. Rather, his simplicity amplified the force of his philosophical insights, making them resonate with greater clarity and immediacy. He demonstrated that profound ideas, such as the oneness of humanity, the illusory nature of caste, or the fleetingness of worldly attachments, could be expressed without complex metaphors or flowery diction, and it continues to inspire people toward reflection and change in the modern times

His famous aphorisms stand as testament to this method. Statements like "One caste, one religion, one God for mankind" or "Ask the fish its caste" carry immense philosophical weight, yet they are delivered with the disarming clarity of common sense. These utterances, stripped of scholarly jargon, hit at the heart of social prejudices and compel the listener to reconsider the most basic assumptions about identity, morality, and the human condition.

In doing so, Guru transformed the very purpose of philosophical discourse.

2.3.12.1 Poetic Works Reflecting Plain Speech

Guru's poetic works, especially Jati Mimamsa and Jati Nirnayam, demonstrate how plain language can carry profound philosophical messages:

In Jati Mimamsa, Guru asks, "Will a child come out of the womb marked by caste?" a simple yet radical question that invalidates the entire caste system with an appeal to common sense.

In Jati Nirnayam, Guru defines caste as humanity itself, using lucid Malayalam diction to assert that caste distinctions are man-made and baseless. His verses present philosophical reasoning in clear, trans-parent language, removing any need for complex metaphors or technical jargon.

Recap

- Guru's plain speech aimed to break caste and language hierarchies.
- Using simple language, Guru reached both scholars and common people.
- His plain speech was a tool of social transformation.
- Guru believed that truth should be clear and accessible.
- His use of plain speech was rooted in ethical and philosophical beliefs.
- Plain speech allowed deep ideas to be understood without scholarly jargon.
- Guru used humor and plain logic to critique social norms.
- His aphorisms conveyed complex truths in simple terms.
- Plain speech encouraged critical thinking among the masses.
- He critiqued ritualism using relatable, everyday examples.
- Guru's plain speech was deeply rooted in lived experience.
- His language choices reflected his vision of social inclusivity.
- Using common idioms, Guru made philosophy practical and relevant.
- Plain speech fostered communal harmony and social equality.
- Guru's humor broke down resistance to social change.
- His plain language was a form of ethical resistance to elitism.
- Simplicity in language empowered the marginalized to understand philosophy.
- Plain speech bridged traditional spirituality with modern rationalism.
- Guru's language choices were deliberate acts of social inclusion.
- Humor in plain speech revealed social contradictions.
- Plain language fostered deeper public engagement with reform ideas.
- Guru's plain speech became a model for subsequent social movements.
- His critique of caste and purity norms was expressed in clear, direct language.
- Plain speech dismantled the elitist control over spiritual knowledge.
- Through plain speech, Guru made philosophy an everyday practice.

Objective Questions

1. What fundamental concept is central to Guru's philosophical poetry?
2. What does Guru's metaphor of 'wave and ocean' represent?
3. What does the metaphor of 'lamp with five wicks' symbolise?
4. What is the core theme of Guru's poem 'Atmopadesa Śatakam'?
5. What does the image of the 'chariot' represent in Guru's poetry?
6. What kind of language does Guru use to express spiritual truths?
7. What style of poetry does Guru's philosophical diction resemble?
8. What does Guru's integration of sound and rhythm aim to achieve?
9. What quality of Guru's poetry makes it accessible to common people?
10. What does the metaphor 'body as foam' signify in Guru's poetry?

Answers

1. Oneness
2. Unity
3. Senses
4. Self-Realisation
5. Body
6. Simple
7. Upaniṣadic
8. Contemplation
9. Clarity
10. Impermanence

Assignments

1. Discuss the role of plain speech in Guru's philosophical approach.
2. How did plain speech facilitate social reform according to Guru?
3. Analyse the use of humor as a rhetorical tool in Guru's plain speech.
4. What makes plain speech an effective medium for social critique?
5. Evaluate the relevance of plain speech in contemporary social movements.

SGOU

BLOCK - 2

UNIT

The Prevalence of Tamil in Guru's Diction

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- understand the use of symbolism in Guru's poetic expressions
- analyse how symbolic language conveys philosophical concepts in Guru's works
- appreciate the integration of symbolic elements to address social issues
- explore the relationship between symbolism and spiritual awakening in Guru's poetry
- explore Guru's exchanges with and in Tamil language

Prerequisites

Sree Narayana Guru's poetic diction is marked by its linguistic richness and cultural inclusivity, reflecting his profound scholarship in Malayalam, Sanskrit, and Tamil. Among these, Tamil holds a distinct place, not merely as a language of expression but as a philosophical and literary influence that shaped the texture, tone, and thematic scope of his works. Guru's deep engagement with Tamil Bhakti and Siddha traditions, his mastery over Tamil prosody, and his interactions with Tamil-speaking regions and reformers created a lasting Tamil imprint on his literary creations.

Key themes

Symbolism, Spiritual Awakening, Philosophical Expression, Social Critique, Nature Symbols, Metaphor, Poetic Imagery

Discussion

In the article "Nārāyaṇaguruvum Tamiḻ Tāymozhiyum Saṅghasaṃskāra Dhārakaḷum," Dr. Ajay Śēkhar points out many of the aspects related to Gurus connection with Tamil literature and language. "All letters originate from the letter A…," this opening thought from Tamil grammar and philosophy sets the tone for Guru's deep-rooted association with the ancient Tamil linguistic and cultural world. Guru had a profound connection with the ancient Tamilakam region, which included parts of present-day Kerala. This region, enriched with cultural antiquity and civilisational continuity, is where Tamil served as the foundational language and script.

Guru maintained strong ties with the Īḻavar community throughout his life. When Malayalam felt suffocating for him, Guru turned towards Īḻam (the Tamil-speaking world). His journeys through Tamilakam transformed him into "Guru" in the fullest sense. We should also recall the phrase often heard with reference to our spiritual masters: "The journey makes the Guru." The influence of the Tamil language and its urban cultural finesse on Guru's works must be explored deeply by future generations. Besides Malayalam and Sanskrit, Guru had a remarkable fluency in Tamil, both in usage and literary expression. Even in his youth, he had acquired the viruttam (metrical) capacity to compose in Tamil.

Guru's travels through Tamilakam introduced him to the brilliance of the Southern mother tongue. His multilingual creativity and literary authorship emerged through his journeys across Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and the Īḻam cultural landscape. With a discerning and critical intellect, he developed a polyphonic voice, embracing Tamil's linguistic radiance that once shone through the Dhamma lipis of Ashoka and through the ethical teachings of early bhikṣuṇīs and bhikṣus of the Saṅgha era (Ilamkulaṃ 67–116). His close companions, like Veḷuttēri and Peruneḷḷi, who were non-Brahmin poets and physicians, had deep knowledge of Tamil and embodied a multilingual spirit. After completing his early education in Vāraṇappaḷḷi–Kummaṇppaḷḷi, Peruneḷḷi Kṛṣṇaṉ Vaidyar defied caste restrictions to study grammar that was once monopolised by Brahmins. Unfortunately, his translation of the Tirukkuṟaḷ was lost over time (Dāmōdaraṉ 10). In a tragic end, Peruneḷḷi, accused of violating caste codes, was poisoned by reactionary forces who invoked charges of ritual pollution. The Āṟāṭṭuppuḻha murder and the persecution of Ayyā Vaikuṇṭa Swāmi at Pulimaṭa must also be remembered as symbolic of caste oppression inflicted by the privileged.

2.4.1 Linguistic and Stylistic Influence of Tamil on Guru's Diction

Sree Narayana Guru's familiarity with Tamil from early life informed his vocabulary, syntax, and poetic devices, especially in his Malayalam works. Guru

studied Tamil formally in his youth, acquiring proficiency in Tamil grammar, classical poetry, and philosophical texts. This fluency allowed him to naturally integrate Tamil expressions, structures, and conceptual terms into his diction. In works like Śiva Śatakam, Guru's Malayalam verses carry Tamil terms like "aruḷ" (grace), a central concept in Tamil Shaiva Siddhānta, which rarely appears in Sanskritic contexts. The Dravidian rhythm and folk style in his Kundalinippattu (Song of the Kundalini) also reflect Tamil aesthetic influence. Written in Malayalam but composed in Dravidian folk meters, Kundalinippattu employs images like the serpent, sheep, and fire, motifs drawn from Tamil Siddha and folk traditions. This blending of Sanskritic and Dravidian literary traditions showcases Guru's linguistic versatility and conscious use of Tamil poetic styles.

In the article, Nārāyaṇaguruvum Tamiḻ Tāymozhiyum Saṅghasaṃskāra Dhārakaḷum, Ajay Śēkhar has pointed out that one of the earliest known figures to call Guru "Nāṇuvāśān" was Peruneḷḷi. His Tamil-related works, some partially surviving, some lost, reflect Guru's linguistic versatility. These include:

- A partial translation of Tirukkuṟaḷ (the ethical classic by Tiruvaḷḷuvar)
- Translations of selected Tēvārap Paṭikaṅṅaḷ (devotional hymns)
- A Tamil version of the Gaṅgāṣṭakam
- A philosophical poem known as Paṃpāṭṭiccinta, also referred to as Kuṇḍalinippaṭṭu

These are the primary texts where Tamil influence is clearly visible. However, Guru's use of Tamil goes beyond content, as his poetic style, idiom, and linguistic register often reflect deep roots in Tamil tradition. He did not merely translate; he transformed. His translations were not word-for-word renderings (padānupada tarjjimā) but cultural adaptations, reinterpreting and reshaping ideas with critical engagement. His translation methodology resembled what we now identify as interpretive or critical translation, where the translator seeks cultural equivalence rather than literal accuracy.

As Dr. T. Bhāskaran observes, the 1894 translation of the Tirukkuṟaḷ by Guru demonstrates a deeply settled and internalised Tamil linguistic environment (Bhāskaran 1975: 53). The Nāṇuvāśān tradition initiates the modern Kerala school of reflective translations, not just textual but ideological translations, often aligning with the enlightenment rationality of colonial modernity.

This tradition is also reflected in Guru's 1914 public praise of the West, where he says:

"The Westerners are the ones who gave us sannyāsa."

This famous statement illustrates the interweaving of Tamil spiritual traditions and colonial enlightenment in Guru's worldview, not as submissive adoption, but as selective appropriation with transformative intent. His use of "twilight language" (sandhā bhāṣā), characteristic of Tamil Siddha poetry, is another hallmark. Many verses present layers of meaning, appealing simultaneously to orthodox Vedantic interpretations and esoteric Tamil yogic traditions.

2.4.2 Cultural and Philosophical Influences from Tamil Bhakti and Siddha Traditions

Sree Narayana Guru's literary and philosophical engagement with Tamil transcended mere linguistic affinity. His deep familiarity with Tamil Shaiva Bhakti traditions, the mystical Siddha heritage, and Tamil ethical-philosophical texts significantly shaped the content, imagery, tone, and the humanistic ideals embedded in his poetry and teachings. Guru not only incorporated Tamil diction into his literary expressions but also internalized the spiritual democracy, metaphysical insights, and symbolic richness of these Tamil traditions.

2.4.2.1 The Influence of Tamil Bhakti Literature and Imagery

One of the most profound cultural streams that influenced Guru was the Tamil Bhakti movement, which flourished between the 6th and 12th centuries CE and produced vast devotional literatures like the Tēvāram and Divya Prabandham composed by the Nāyanmārs (Shaiva saints) and Ālvārs (Vaishnava saints), respectively. These works were written in simple Tamil, accessible to common people, and prioritized personal devotion (bhakti) over ritualistic practices, a vision that resonated powerfully with Guru's own egalitarian worldview.

2.4.2.2 Guru's Adoption of Bhakti Style and Themes

Narayana Guru was profoundly influenced by the Bhakti ethos, which emphasised an emotionally direct communion with the divine and rejected caste-based barriers in spiritual practice. This devotional spirit is particularly evident in his Tamil hymns, such as the Tēvāra Pathikaṅṅaḷ [തേവാരപ്പതികങ്ങൾ], where he adopts the first-person voice of a devotee, offering intimate appeals, praises, and acts of surrender to the deity. These compositions mirror the tone and style of classical Tamil Bhakti poetry, particularly the works of Nāyanmārs like Tirugnānasambandhar, Appar, and Sundarar.

Composed in classical Tamil (*pāḻaittaḻi*), Guru's *Tēvāra Pathikaṅṅaḷ* demonstrate not only his command of the language but also his adeptness in the poetics of Tamil *Shaiva Bhakti*. He employs traditional epithets and metaphors for Śiva, such as the dancing Lord, the ocean of grace (*aruḷ*), and the destroyer of impurities (*mala*), while replicating the musical cadence and refrains typical of Tamil devotional hymns.

Though there is no record of Guru having received formal instruction in Tamil, the language was widely understood in Thiruvananthapuram during his time. As a young man, Guru regularly visited a Tamil bookshop in the Chalai market area, where he read extensively. The shopkeeper not only encouraged this habit but occasionally left the store under Guru's care, suggesting a relationship of trust and familiarity. This informal engagement was likely to have contributed to Guru's deep acquaintance with ancient Tamil literature.

Guru's life included a period of itinerant wandering as an *avadhūta* (wandering ascetic), during which he travelled extensively across Tamil Nadu. These travels further strengthened his exposure to Tamil culture and its spiritual traditions.

The Tēvāram tradition, to which Guru's Tamil hymns are closely related, comprises devotional songs addressed to Śiva by Tamil Shaiva saints. Guru's

compositions align with this tradition both in content and structure. However, in their philosophical reflection and expression of advaitānubhūti (experiential non-duality), his hymns also resonate with other Tamil philosophical works such as Tiruvāṟuḷpā and Ozhivil Odukkam [ഒഴുവിലൊടുക്കം].

While Guru's Malayalam and Sanskrit writings embody a modern literary idiom, his Tamil hymns follow a more archaic linguistic style, characteristic of classical Tamil *Bhakti* poetry. This renders them more challenging to interpret. In Tamil literary usage, *Tēvāram* refers specifically to the hymns sung in praise of Śiva by Tirugnānasambandhar, Sundarar, and Appar, though the term can more broadly imply devotional practices like worship, chanting (*japa*), and sacred song. Similarly, *Tiruvācakam* is a Śiva stotra by Māṇikkavācakar, and *Tiruvāṟuḷpā* was composed by Rāmaliṅga Swāmikal, also known as Vaḷḷalār. A *Pathikam* refers to a set of ten verses.

Five *Tēvāra Pathikaṅṅaḷ* by Narayana Guru have been identified, all composed in praise of Śiva. In devotional intensity, they stand alongside the hymns of the Tamil saints. In terms of metaphysical reflection and poetic articulation of non-duality, they share affinities with *Tiruvāṟuḷpā* and *Ozhivil Odukkam*. Guru is even believed to have translated portions of *Ozhivil Odukkam* into Malayalam, though these translations have not yet been found.

It is reported that Guru often asked visiting Tamil devotees whether they preferred *Tēvāram* or *Ozhivil Odukkam*, and it is generally understood that his own preference lay with the latter. This points to his deeper philosophical engagement with Tamil texts that transcend ritual devotion and articulate refined metaphysical insight. Guru's works and life reveal a natural affinity with *Śaiva samskṛti* (Shaiva culture). Even in his more philosophical writings, references to Śiva are not uncommon. A notable example is this verse from the *Ātmopadeśa Śatakam*:

ത്രിഗുണമയം തിരുനീറണിഞ്ഞൊരീശ-
ന്നകമലരിട്ടു വണങ്ങിയക്ഷമാറി
സകലമഴിഞ്ഞു തണിഞ്ഞു കേവലത്തിൻ
മഹിമയുമറ്റു മഹസ്സിലാണിടേണം

Among the five *Pathikaṅṅaḷ*, the first is explicitly addressed to the deity of Śrīnāyanār Kōvil at Arumanoor near Neyyattinkara. The contexts of the other four hymns, however, remain unidentified.

2.4.2.3 Nandanar Narrative Influence and Caste Emancipation Theme

Equally significant is Guru's adoption of narrative elements from Tamil Bhakti legends, particularly stories highlighting caste transcendence through divine grace. The most telling example is the parallel between Guru's Śiva Śatakam and the Nandanar legend, a central tale from Tamil Shaiva Bhakti.

In the Nandanar story, a Dalit devotee of Shiva is barred from entering the temple due to his caste but attains salvation through his intense devotion. The Lord himself intervenes, symbolising the power of bhakti to overcome social barriers. Guru's Śiva Śatakam contains similar themes, where the focus is on the divine embracing all beings, regardless of their birth or social position. In certain verses, Guru presents a devotee of humble origin achieving spiritual union, an unmistakable homage to the Tamil Bhakti ideal that true devotion, not caste, earns divine favour.

2.4.2.4 Tamil Bhakti's Impact on Guru's Egalitarian Philosophy

Tamil Bhakti's critique of caste and orthodoxy had a lasting impact on Guru's social philosophy and literary diction. Like

the Nāyanmārs, who openly criticized ritualistic excesses, caste hierarchies, and temple monopolies, Guru echoed similar sentiments in his poetry, speeches, and reformist actions. His Jati Nirnayam (On Caste) and the maxim "Ask not, say not, think not caste" bear the imprint of this Bhakti egalitarianism.

Moreover, Guru's frequent use of Tamil Shaiva concepts like aruḷ (grace) and pati-paśu-pāśa (God- soul bondage) in his Malayalam works reflects his absorption of Tamil Bhakti metaphysics into his diction. His emphasis on the all-encompassing grace of God, accessible without intermediaries, aligns seamlessly with the core spiritual democracy of Tamil Bhakti.

The deep connection between Guru and Tamil began with the previous generation of social-spiritual reformers, including Cattampi Svāmikaḷ, Taikkaṭṭayya, and Ayyā Vaikuṇṭar. These figures, all of whom engaged with Tamilakam, were enlightened personalities who acquired both bodhodaya (awakening of knowledge) and aṟivu (insight) from their immersion in Tamil culture.

A close look reveals that the Kerala Renaissance truly began in Tamilakam. This is because thinkers like Ayyā Vaikuṇṭar, Taikkaṭṭayya, Cattampi Svāmikaḷ, and Nāṇu Gurusvāmi absorbed many intellectual streams from Tamil spiritual and ethical traditions. Western missionary influence also played a major role in shaping these engagements (Pāṇṭyaṉ 1990, 2007).

2.4.3 Thycaud Ayyavu Swamikal – A Living Link to Tamil Siddha Wisdom

Strengthening Guru's Siddha influence was his formative relationship with Thycaud Ayyavu Swamikal, a prominent yogi and scholar based in Trivandrum with deep roots in Tamil Siddha philosophy and yoga. Ayyavu Swamikal, well-versed in Tamil, Sanskrit, and yogic sciences, is believed to have initiated Guru into advanced meditation and yogic practices, including techniques for kundalini awakening, breath control, and inner realisation.

This mentorship not only expanded Guru's practical understanding of Siddha yoga but also deepened his affinity for the philosophical and linguistic traditions of Tamil mysticism. Under Ayyavu's influence, Guru absorbed the non-sectarian spiritual outlook of the Siddhas, focusing on inner experience over external ritual and universal compassion over narrow dogmas.

2.4.4 Ayya Vaikunda Swamikal: Life and Universalist Principles

Ayya Vaikunda Swamikal (1809–1851) was a 19th-century Tamil social reformer and the founding prophet of the Ayyavazhi movement. Emerging in the deep south of the erstwhile Travancore (present-day Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu), Ayya Vaikundar preached a universal religion that transcended caste and creed. He is revered for advocating equality, fraternity, and the eradication of caste-based discrimination, directly challenging the rigid religious and social hierarchies of his time. Rejecting Brahmanical orthodoxy, he taught that all humans are children of one God, articulating a vision often summarized as "one caste, one religion, one God" for humanity. This principle of spiritual unity was at the core of Ayyavazhi and reflected a broader Tamil Siddha philosophy (for instance, a Tamil Saiva text, Tirumantiram, proclaims "onṛe kulam onṛe tevan"—one "clan,

one God). Such teachings positioned Ayyavazhi as a "path of the Father" open to all, emphasizing social equality and opposition to ritualism.

In practice, Ayya Vaikundar implemented bold reforms that embodied these ideals. He organized samapanthi-bhojanam— community feasts where people of all castes dined together—even sending his close followers to share meals in the homes of those deemed "lower" in caste. He also combated caste segregation in daily life by digging common wells (muthirikinaru) accessible to all communities when marginalized groups were forbidden from using public water sources. In an age when upper-caste priests avoided physical contact with lower-caste devotees, Ayya Vaikundar introduced the "Thottu Namam" ritual: he encouraged priests to apply the sacred ash or sandal paste by hand on every devotee's forehead, regardless of caste, symbolically asserting the divine spark within each individual.

Furthermore, Ayya Vaikundar established networks of low-key worship centres known as Nizhal Thangals (literally "shadow foot-halls") as alternatives to orthodox temples. These Nizhal Thangals had no idols or elaborate rituals, used the local Tamil language (instead of Sanskrit) for prayers, and functioned as community hubs with kitchens and schools attached. Such measures exemplified his opposition to empty ritualism and priestly monopoly – he sought to democratize spiritual practice by stripping away idol-centric worship and caste restrictions. In a nutshell, Ayya Vaikunda Swamikal's legacy in Tamil South India was a pioneering religious movement that blended devotion with social reform, declaring a new inclusive faith in which all humans shared one religion and one God, caste distinctions were erased, and practical acts of equality replaced oppressive customs.

2.4.5 Parallels in Teachings and Reformist Actions

Sree Narayana Guru (1856–1928) emerged a few decades later in Kerala, and although he did not directly meet Ayya Vaikundar, his philosophy and actions show remarkable thematic convergences with Vaikundar's reformist ideals. Guru was a trilingual scholar-saint (fluent in Malayalam, Sanskrit, and Tamil) whose thought and diction were shaped in part by Tamil spiritual influences. Notably, as a young aspirant, he studied under Thaikkattu (Thycaud) Ayya Swamikal, a disciple of Ayya Vaikundar, through whom he was introduced to Tamil Saiva-Siddhanta teachings. This early immersion helped Guru imbibe the same egalitarian and anti-caste spirit. Both Ayya Vaikundar and Sree Narayana Guru became renowned as saintly social reformers, and a comparative look at their teachings and actions highlights a shared agenda of breaking oppressive traditions and uniting people:

2.4.6 Breaking Caste Barriers

Ayya Vaikundar and Sree Narayana Guru both waged relentless campaigns against the stratified caste system. Ayya Vaikundar's "uplift of the lowly is dharma" mantra was reflected in his every effort to dismantle untouchability—he brought different castes together for communal baths, meals, and worship. Likewise, Narayana Guru dedicated his life to overturning caste injustices in Keralite society. In 1888, Guru performed the unprecedented Aruvippuram consecration by installing a Shiva idol himself (an act traditionally reserved for Brahmins), boldly declaring that Divinity has no caste. This sparked a social uproar among upper castes, to which Guru quipped that he had installed "Our own Shiva" for the

marginalized devotees - a pointed satire that God could indeed belong to any devotee.

Guru went on to consecrate 45 temples across Kerala and Tamil Nadu, many of which were deliberately intended to break conventions – for example, some featured no orthodox idol at all but rather a slab inscribed with the word "Truth" or a polished mirror as the object of veneration. By opening these places of worship to everyone irrespective of caste, Sree Narayana Guru put into practice the same one-caste ideal that Ayya Vaikundar had earlier championed. Both men, in essence, proclaimed that all of humanity is one caste (the human race) and advocated social integration as a spiritual duty. It is no coincidence that Narayana Guru's defining motto – "One Caste, One Religion, One God for all human beings" – mirrors the egalitarian slogan long associated with Ayya Vaikundar's movement.

Scholars confirm that Guru's famous maxims were inspired by pre-existing Tamil Saiva-Siddha ideas and the Ayyavazhi slogan, indicating a direct philosophical continuum. In the teachings of both the reformers, the eradication of caste barriers was not merely their social activism but a spiritual affirmation of the oneness of God and man.

Temple Reforms and Opposition to Ritualism: Both leaders undertook radical reforms to redefine religious worship in more inclusive terms. Ayya Vaikundar rejected the grandeur of orthodox temple rituals that perpetuated caste segregation and instead proceeded in founding simple Ayyavazhi worship centers (Pathis and Nizhal Thangals) where no caste-based entry restrictions or Brahmin priesthood existed. He even de-emphasized idol worship by using symbolic representations (such as a mirror or a flame emblem) to remind devotees of the divine within themselves, thus opposing the ritualistic idolatry that had become a tool of exclusion. Sree Narayana Guru similarly strove to "democratize" temple worship. By installing idols with his own non-Brahmin hands and permitting people of all castes to pray together, he subverted the notion that religion was the preserve of the upper caste.

In later years, Guru's most iconoclastic installations – such as placing a mirror as the deity in the 1927 Kalavankode temple – directly conveyed the message that the divine is a reflection of the worshipper, not an external idol accessible only via priests. Both reformers thus shed rigid ritualism in favour of simplified, experiential spirituality. In their view, moral living and unity were more sacred than intricate ceremonies. It is noteworthy that Tamil was the language of Ayya Vaikundar's liturgy, and vernacular Malayalam (alongside Tamil and Sanskrit) became the medium of Guru's hymns and teachings – underscoring that true religion should speak in the tongue of the people, not in esoteric chants controlled by a few. Their reforms brought religion from the cloister of rituals to the common humanity.

2.4.6.1 Community Integration and Spiritual Democratization

A hallmark of both movements was the effort to knit disparate social groups into a single moral community. Ayya Vaikundar built an egalitarian religious community among downtrodden Tamils – including Nadars, Ezhavas, and other "avarnas" – offering them dignity and fellowship within Ayyavazhi when mainstream society shunned them. His community feasts, shared wells, common attire (turban and dhoti for all), and inclusive rituals were practical instruments to erode social divisions.

2.4.7 Socio-Political Impact Across Tamil Nadu and Kerala

The movements spearheaded by Ayya Vaikunda Swamikal in Tamil South India and by Sree Narayana Guru in Kerala had wide-ranging socio-political consequences, which often intersected and reinforced each other across linguistic and regional boundaries. In Tamil Nadu (especially the erstwhile Tamil-speaking parts of Travancore), Ayya Vaikundar's crusade galvanized oppressed communities and sowed the early seeds of resistance against caste tyranny. The immediate legacy of his movement could be seen in events shortly after his lifetime – for example, the famous Channar Revolt (Upper Cloth Movement) of the 1850s, in which Nadar women defied caste rules by wearing upper-body clothing, is often linked to the atmosphere of assertion that Ayya Vaikundar's teachings fostered. His followers, inspired by the ideal of living with "self-respect, social dignity and fearlessness," were emboldened to challenge social norms.

Likewise, early temple-entry agitations in the region drew inspiration from Ayyavazhi's message – many lower-caste devotees, armed with the belief in a universal God, attempted to enter orthodox temples or set up parallel worship, leading to sporadic confrontations that presaged organized movements to come. In due course, Ayya Vaikundar's reformism earned him the honorific "Morning Star of the South Indian social reform movement," as he paved the way for later reformers. Historians note that prominent 19th-century and early 20th-century reformers across South India – Saint Ramalinga (Vallalar) in Tamil Nadu, Sree Narayana Guru in Kerala, Kandukuri Veeresalingam in Andhra, and even Periyar E.V. Ramasamy of the Tamil Self-Respect movement – all drew indirect influence from Ayya Vaikundar's revolutionary teachings. His vision of an egalitarian spiritual order provided a common conceptual rallying point that transcended regional confines.

In Kerala, Sree Narayana Guru's movement sparked a profound social transformation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Unfortunately, in Tamilakam, the movement that preceded the Keralite reformation struggle did not create the desired result. This happened due to their inability to organize the uneducated men and women belonging to various subaltern communities. They failed to promote an inclusive approach welcoming all the marginalized into an organized move, as happened in Kerala. The inclusiveness was an essential prerequisite for any liberation movement to succeed against Brahminical hegemony.

The Brahminical authority enforcing four or five divisions in the caste hierarchy was a strong foundation that ought not to have been underestimated. It was impossible to demolish it easily, as it wielded the politics of power in the Indian social structure. Even in Bengal and Calcutta, the failure in consolidating the subaltern forces under Brahma Samaj ultimately failed in breaking the power structure of the dominating class. It required physical confrontation, if necessary over and above the spread of the Renaissance spirit by the intellectuals and reformists. in Kerala, Guru and Kumaran Asan, through their inspiration imbibed from Tamil reform ideals, Tamil Classics, Bengal renaissance spirit, and the exposure to the revolutionary spirits of the English Romantic writers like P.B. Shelley (Asan got opportunity to understand their affinity for universal brotherhood during the period of his Sanskrit education in Calcutta, which Guru materialized

through Dr. Palpu, managed to overtake the initiatives in Tamizhakam, Bengal and Calcutta in their goal of carrying Kerala society to the reformation they conceived. Dr. Palpu's role in inspiring Narayana Guru to establish SNDP Yogam is also to be viewed as one of the key factors behind the achievements.

When the Yogam was founded in 1903, it became the earliest organization in Kerala, as it happened 22 years before the establishment of the Communist Party of India (1925) and 35 years before the formation of the State Congress in Travancore (Kerala), i.e., in 1938. Narayana Guru himself was in its presidential position with his disciple and celebrated Renaissance poet Kumaran Asan sworn in as its organizing secretary. It was the spiritual and moral leadership of the saint and the zest of the revolutionary spirit in Asan, brought together in a perfect fusion, that sowed the revolutionary impulses for a peaceful social reform, which culminated in its success. The message Guru communicated to instruct the society, through his didactic creative works, mystical writing, exhortations, plain speech and attempts at addressing the spiritual and educational quests of the marginalized, empowered them mentally, physically, and organizationally for a confrontation with the dominating powers.

Kumaran Asan's revolutionary seeds scattered through his works germinated even in the minds of those of the dominant classes of Kerala society, which prepared them for a mental makeup to accept the imminent social change. No wonder EMS Namboodiripad, the leftist thinker, observed, 'Guru ploughed the keralite soil and prepared it for communism to spread its roots in the years to follow.' Guru's mission to bring the reformation was aided and accelerated to success by the contemporary reformers like Chattampi Swamikal, Ayyankali and the organization – SNDP Yogam, which culminated in the protest land worked as 'Vaikam Sathyagraha' of 1924-25 (a non-violent protest for lower caste access to temple roads, which was prohibited till then) and eventually the Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936, which officially opened Hindu temples in Travancore to all castes.

In brief, Sreenarayana Guru, for his part, traversed the linguistic divide and explored the devotional instructive works in Tamil and frequently engaged with Tamil scholars with the specific purpose. He brought up Kumaran Asan to resonate revolutionary ideals to reform the society and set a guideline that the caste barrier can be defeated or surpassed in the Indian social structure. Setting its example in Kerala society, his contribution needs to be acknowledged not only for its practical value but also for the attempt to resonate it beyond Kerala, to the whole world. With his trilingual scholarship, his writings carved a pan-Indian appeal, blending Kerala's spiritual idiom not only with Tamil Siddha and Bhakti literatures but also transcending the wisdom to a broader humanity. His ethical poems, which echo themes of 'Thirukural' and other Tamil classics propagate an intelligible philosophy and attractive themes to liberate oneself from Tamil linguistic barriers to a wider public and substantiate how, in Kerala, the spiritual idiom has been explored to break caste hierarchies. The Tamil Siddha and Bhakthi traditions, which are echoed in Guru's ethical poems intending to reform philosophy and social order, substantiate Guru's attempt to build intellectual bridges between different communities, near and distant

Their cross-cultural relations with Tamil literature and ideology and other Renaissance scholar reform movements in India have converged to influence

popular consciousness across linguistic boundaries. Their shared slogan of oneness became a pan-regional clarion call; by the early 20th century, the phrase "one caste, one religion, one God for all" had entered common parlance among progressive movements in both Kerala and Tamil Nadu. This diffusion was aided by the print media and bilingual propagators. The result was a broader South Indian renaissance in social thought—people began to question caste prejudice, campaign for educational access and civil rights, and embrace the idea of a universal spiritual humanhood. In academic retrospect, Ayya Vaikunda Swamikal's movement is seen as the prototypical reform laboratory that foreshadowed and considerably influenced the renaissance in Kerala, under Sree Narayana Guru.

2.4.8 Malayalam Translation of Tirukkural: Literary and Ethical Significance

One of the most significant Tamil influences on Narayana Guru was his engagement with the Tirukkural, the classical Tamil masterpiece on ethics by Tiruvalluvar. Guru not only studied the Tirukkural intensively in its original Tamil, but he also undertook a Malayalam translation of this work. The Tirukkural (c. 2nd century BCE) is renowned for its outstanding brevity and universal ethical vision: it comprises 1,330 couplets organized into 133 chapters (each containing 10 couplets) and covers the three aims of life – virtue, wealth, and love (Tamil: aram, poruḷ, inbam). Guru's decision to translate this Tamil ethical classic was driven by both intellectual admiration and reformist impulse.

2.4.8.1 Reflections on Tirukkuṟaḷ, Jīvakāruṇyapañcakam, and Guru's Ethical Aesthetic

(From the articles Nārāyaṇaguruvum Tamiḻ Tāymozhiyum Saṅghasaṃskāra Dhārakaḷum, Dr. Ajay Śēkhar; and Jīvakāruṇyapañcakam: Oru Paṭhanaṃ, Dr. Āśālatha)

The Tirukkuṟaḷ, authored by Tiruvaḷḷuvar, is a text that addresses all humanity. Its universal ethical vision profoundly influenced Guru's Jīvakāruṇyapañcakam. Each sūkta (aphorism) in the Tirukkuṟaḷ glows with the clarity of reason and compassion.

Chapter 25 of the Tirukkuṟaḷ, titled Aruḷuṭamai (Compassion), emphasises the importance of love and empathy in the life of a householder. It insists that compassion must extend to all living beings, regardless of form or category. Its third aphorism declares: എല്ലാ ജീവജാലങ്ങളോടും കാരുണ്യമുള്ളവർക്ക് ദുരിതങ്ങളും ഇരുട്ടും നിറഞ്ഞ ലോകത്തിൽ പ്രവേശനമില്ല.

("Those who possess compassion toward all living beings will never enter a world filled with darkness and suffering.")

The text further argues that only those who are compassionate can experience heavenly joy. Guru extends this ethical vision in Jīvakāruṇyapañcakam, challenging the logic of selective nonviolence. He asks:

"If killing another living being can be considered dharma, how can killing humans then be deemed adharma?"

He critiques inconsistencies in the application of ethical norms, pointing to a skewed dharma that permits violence against animals while outlawing violence

against humans.

A verse from Chapter 26 of the Tirukkuṟaḷ, titled Pulā Maruttal (Abstaining from Meat), reads:

തന്മയ് തടിപ്പിക്കാൻ മറ്റുമെയ്യു
ണ്ണുന്നോനെമ്മട്ടരുളുള്ളോനാകും (26.1)

It suggests that only those who are unaware of their own mortality can cause suffering to other beings, thinking their own body will remain even when everything else perishes.

Guru states unequivocally: refraining from eating (tinnāvatam) is even more sacred than merely abstaining from killing (kollāvratam). To him, ahimsā is not just about non-killing; it's about non-consumption and non-complicity.

A passage from Chapter 28 of the Tirukkuṟaḷ drives this point further:

പടൈകൊണ്ടാർ നെഞ്ചം പോൽ നൻറുക്കാ
തൊൻറൻ ഉറ്റൽ ചുവൈ ഉണ്ടാർ മനം
(28.3)

The heart of a soldier brandishing a weapon and the mind of a person who delights in meat are both equally devoid of compassion. The eater is as guilty as the killer.

Thus, Jīvakāruṇyapañcakam is not just a spiritual document; it is a moral declaration. Guru uses poetic diction to unfold ethical layers, establishing the foundations of a new moral universe where the first step is compassion.

He proclaims,

കൊല്ലായ്കിലവൻ ഗുണമുള്ള പുമാ-
നല്ലായ്കിൽ മൃഗത്തൊടു തുല്യനവൻ
കൊല്ലുന്നവനില്ല ശരണ്യത മ-
റ്റെല്ലാവക നന്മയുമാർന്നിടിലും.

These lines assert that the person who refrains from killing is virtuous, while even a godlike man becomes no better than an animal if he indulges in slaughter.

Reasons for Guru's Engagement: The Tirukkural's philosophy resonated deeply with Guru's own humanistic and egalitarian ideals. As a social reformer, Guru valued the Kural's emphasis on aram (virtue/dharma) as the guiding principle for personal and social life. Unlike many scriptural texts, the Tirukkural is non-sectarian—it expounds a moral code applicable to all, regardless of caste or creed. This would have appealed to Guru, who preached "One caste, one religion, one God for all," seeking ethical uplift beyond sectarian boundaries. Biographical accounts note that in his early years Guru avidly read Tamil classics, including Tirukkural, Tirumandiram, Tiruppugazh and others, while working at a Tamil bookshop. Mastery of such Tamil spiritual lore equipped him with a comparative outlook on ethics. By translating the Tirukkural into Malayalam (often called Tirukkural Bhasha), Guru aimed to make its wisdom accessible to Malayali society, bridging a cultural gap between Tamil and Malayalam literary worlds. This endeavor can be seen as part of Guru's broader mission to educate and morally reform his community using the best of Indian wisdom in vernacular languages.

Impact on Guru's Poetic Style and Ethical Diction: Engaging with the Tirukkural influenced Guru's own writing style and moral vocabulary in obvious ways. The Kural couplets are famed for their conciseness and clarity – each aphoristic couplet packs profound meaning, often in just seven Tamil words, following the tight kural veṇpā meter. Guru, in translating these into Malayalam, had to distill ideas with similar brevity and precision. This practice of expressing complex ethical ideas in a compact form

likely honed the aphoristic quality of Guru's later Malayalam verses. Indeed, many of Guru's original compositions (for example, Sadacharam – "Good Conduct" – seven verses on ethics) exhibit a succinct, didactic style reminiscent of Tiruvalluvar's maxims. We find Guru adopting a crisp ethical diction: words and concepts like puṇya (virtue), pāpa (vice), nenjil (heart), and metaphors for moral character that mirror the directness of the Kural. Furthermore, Guru's exposure to Tamil ethical terminology led him to incorporate Tamil words for key concepts; for instance, the Tamil term aram (virtue or dharma) and its Malayalam cognate aram/dharma became central in his teachings, and the idea of anbu (love/compassion) informed his concept of universal brotherhood.

Guru's translation work also enriched Malayalam with Tamil idioms and ethics. The Tirukkural often employs striking imagery to illustrate moral truths (comparing, say, a good ruler to a rain-bearing cloud or the virtue of patience to the earth). Guru carried some of these analogies into Malayalam, thereby invigorating the Malayali moral imagination with Tamil poetic imagery. By rendering Tirukkural verses like those on rain (which extol rain as the benevolent giver of life) or on renunciants (praising the greatness of ascetics), Guru introduced into Malayalam the concise eloquence and humanist ethos of Tiruvalluvar. In doing so, he set a precedent for translingual ethical dialogue – his Malayalam Tirukkural stands as an early modern link between Tamil literature and Kerala's literary culture.

It is notable that Narayana Guru's Tirukkural translation was one of only two translations he undertook (the other being Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad from Sanskrit), underscoring the importance he placed on this work. While some sources suggest he translated only part of the Kural corpus, the portions he did render (such as the chapters on Rain and Ascetics, discussed below) had a lasting impact on his stylistic development. The exercise of working through Tiruvalluvar's terse couplets sharpened Guru's ability to communicate ethical insights in lucid, straightforward Malayalam. It also enriched his Malayalam vocabulary with Tamil loanwords that carried precise ethical connotations. In summary, Guru's engagement with the Tirukkural was both a tribute to a pan-Indian moral vision and a formative influence on his own voice as a poet-philosopher. Through this translation, he injected the spirit of Tamil ethical thought into Malayalam literature, thereby broadening the moral and linguistic horizons of his readers.

2.4.8.2 Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru's Translation of the Tirukkural and its Interpretive Legacy

Brahmachari Prasād, in his commentary on Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru's Malayalam translation of the *Tirukkural*, discusses several important aspects concerning the Guru's deep engagement with Tamil literary and spiritual culture. Guru had studied all the major Tamil texts with great attention, and their influence is discernible in many of his works. Historical accounts mention that he lived for some time among Tamil book traders in Chāla, Thiruvananthapuram, to learn the Tamil language. One clear fruit of this engagement is his Tamil composition *Tēvārap Patikaṅṅaḷ*, written in the style of the *Tēvāram*, the renowned devotional hymns of the Tamil Siddhas.

The *Tirukkural*, authored by the great Tiruvalluvar, encapsulates the entire spirit of Vedic culture. In the case of Guru, only

chapters two, three, and six of the *Tirukkural* are presently known to have been translated by him into verse in Malayalam. Whether he translated more works that might have been lost or whether he stopped with those sections already available remains undocumented. Some accounts also suggest that he translated the well-known Tamil work *Oḻuviloṭukkām*, though no copies of that Malayalam version have yet surfaced.

Guru's translation of the *Tirukkural* into Malayalam verse, composed in the *anuṣṭubh* metre, stands as a striking testimony to his poetic genius. Among the Tamil texts that captivated him, the *Tirukkural* held a special place. His translation is believed to have been completed in 1894. Of course, before and after Guru, many others have translated the *Tirukkural* into Malayalam, but what distinguishes his effort is the profound reverence he shows both for the text and its author.

In his *Śivaśataka*, Guru refers to the *Tirukkural* as:

സരസ്വതീദേവി വള്ളുവർ നാവിൽ മൊ
ഴിഞ്ഞ ചതുർവേദ സാരം

—"the distilled essence of the four Vedas, uttered through the tongue of Valluvar by the goddess Sarasvatī." Such a statement places the *Tirukkural* on par with the Vedas and Upaniṣads in terms of spiritual weight and authority.

An anecdote from his early days involves Chattampi Swāmikal asking Nānū Āśān (Guru's earlier name) about the book he was reading. On learning it was the *Tirukkural*, Swāmikal asked his opinion of it. Āśān is said to have replied, "This is a Vedic scripture that leads humankind towards virtue. It may also be called the *Upaniṣad of life*." Another early teacher of Guru, Appa Śāstrikaḷ, is quoted to have said, "Even if all the libraries in the world were burned to ashes, if the *Tirukkural* alone remained, it would suffice to regenerate world civilisation." Such was the reverence the *Tirukkural* commanded among the early teachers of Guru.

Like his Malayalam version of the *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad*, Guru's *Tirukkural* translation is also of great importance. The four chapters he rendered—*Kaṭavuḷvāḻttu* (Praise of the Lord), *Vāñciṟappu* (Excellence of Rain), *Nīttār Perumai* (Greatness of Ascetics), and *Vāḻkka Tuṇaitala* (The Worth of a Wife)—were translated respectively as *Īśvara Stuti* (Praise of God), *Varṣa Varṇana* (Description of Rain), *Sannyāsī Mahima* (Glory of the Ascetic), and *Bhāryā Dharma* (Wifely Duties). Guru used simple and elegant language in his translation. At times, he offered independent interpretative renderings, but he never strayed from the core meanings of the original. In several places, he retained Tamil terms alongside the Malayalam, a mark of fidelity to the source.

That one *mahāsiddha* (great realised being) should translate the work of another *mahājñānī* (great knower) naturally increases the stature and influence of the text. In Tamil, the *Tirukkural* has inspired hundreds of commentaries, ranging from the non-dualists (advaitins) to rationalists who deny the existence of God. Since it is not a sectarian religious text, it has invited interpretation from multiple schools of thought. Some scholars have noted striking similarities between the *Tirukkural* and Jain philosophical teachings.

Guru, of course, was a staunch Advaitin, aligned with one of the most dominant philosophical traditions in India. His hymns (*stotra-kṛti*), philosophical treatises (*śāstra-kṛti*), and didactic works (*prabodhanātmaka-kṛti*) all affirm non-dual truth (*advaita satya*). Naturally,

then, his *Tirukkural* translation is to be understood and interpreted in an advaitic light.

Ajay Sekher, in his essay *Nārāyaṇa Guru and Tamil as Mother Tongue*, offers a deep reflection on the Guru's profound connection with Tamil language and culture. According to him, Guru was closely bound to the Tamil linguistic and cultural heritage, which is as rich and ancient as any of the world's earliest civilisations. Tamil, the foundation of South Indian civilisation, was for Guru a deeply resonant mother culture, and he remained rooted in the ancient Tamilakam soil that includes present-day Kerala.

Throughout his life, Guru maintained his ties with the Ezhava community, often returning to Ceylon (Eezham) when alienated in Kerala. His exposure to Tamil culture, language, and spirituality was fundamental to his growth as a thinker. The partially extant translations of the *Tirukkural*, *Tēvārap Patikaṅṅaḷ*, *Oḻuviloṭukkām*, and his Tamil rendering of *Gaṅgāṣṭakam*, along with the poem *Pāmpāṭṭic Cinta*, show the clear Tamil influence in his output.

Guru's style, diction, and even linguistic choices reflect the deep impact of Tamil. His translations are not mechanical renderings; rather, they carry a free and intuitive interpretive spirit, often illuminating broader meanings. As Dr. T. Bhāskaran (1975, p. 53) observes, the *Tirukkural* translation demonstrates how deeply internalised and richly re-expressed Guru's engagement with Tamil was. Through such "interpretive translations," Guru helped initiate a modern Kerala tradition of literary-cultural critique, beginning with Nānūvāśān himself.

This maternal bond with Tamil begins not with Guru only, but with his predecessors—figures such as Chattampi Swāmikal, Taikkāṭṭāyya, and Ayya Vaikuṇṭar—who drew knowledge and spiritual power from Tamil Nāḍu. In fact, as Ajay Sekher points out, the renaissance in Kerala itself may be seen as substantially influenced by Tamilakam.

Indeed, Tamil—known also as *Tamiḻ*, one of the most ancient classical languages in the world—is comparable in antiquity and cultural weight to Egyptian, Sumerian, and Chinese civilisational languages. Guru's travels through Tamilakam, including Madurai and Rameswaram during 1918, and his journeys to Eezham through Tamizhakam in 1926 were formative. He often walked as an avadhūta (renunciate), travelling barefoot, later shifting to rickshaws, trains, and motor cars. At Rameswaram, a temple that always remained closed to an *avaraṇa muni* (untouchable sage) like him denied entry to Narayana Guru. But to his surprise, he was welcomed aboard a grand British steamship to cross to Sri Lanka. This steamship, inaccessible to him through native caste restrictions, became in his poetic vision a symbol of universal consciousness in motion, celebrated in his *Daivadaśakam*.

The British vessel, often referred to as *āvivan tōṇi* (great steamship), became for Guru a metaphor for moral and spiritual transcendence. Though rocked by the waters, the ship stands tall above the sea—an image evoking not only the impermanence central to Buddhist thought but also the enduring ethical vision of Guru's social critique. As late as 1926, two years before his passing away (Samadhi), Guru relocated to Eezham, saying, "I shall no longer remain in Malayalam."

Guru's *Tēvārap Patikaṅṅaḷ* and *Pāmpāṭṭic Cinta* reflect a strong connection to the Tamil Siddha tradition. Notably,

in *Pāmpāṭṭic Cinta*, Guru makes no mention of yogic systems; instead, he uses metaphors such as the boiling of castor oil (*āvana-keṇṇa*) to describe the awakening of spiritual power. His comparison of the Vedic *puruṣasūkta* to a tree sprouting from a broken trunk evokes a grassroots 'philosophical awakening. Drawing on images of the subaltern as snakes—an image paralleling thinkers like Antonio Gramsci and B.R. Ambedkar—Guru envisions marginalised people rising from under the boot of caste hierarchy.

The poem *Pāmpāṭṭic Cinta*, noted as such in Kṛṣṇan Āśān's notebook, has been misrepresented by some caste-bound scholars as a Kundalini poem, though it bears no such relation. In truth, it represents a liberative, rooted epistemology of transformative consciousness. To interpret Guru faithfully, we must turn to contextual, critical readings rooted in justice and ethical clarity.

Beyond formal translations, Tamil language and themes permeate many of Narayana Guru's Malayalam works. A striking example is Vañchirappu (also known as "Varṣavarnana—"Description of Rain"), a Malayalam poem comprising ten verses on the glory of rain, which Guru translated from a Tamil original. The very choice of subject – praising the rain – reflects a classic theme in Tamil literature (rain is celebrated in Sangam poetry and in Tiruvalluvar's Kural for its life-giving grace). In fact, Guru's Vañchirappu corresponds closely to the Tirukkural's chapter on rain (Vaan Sirappu), suggesting that he rendered those Tamil couplets into an expanded Malayalam hymn. In Vañchirappu, we see festive Tamil imagery of the monsoon brought into Malayalam: dark clouds bursting forth, fields rejoicing, and the rain seen as a form of divine blessing. This imagery echoes Tamil literary conventions where rain is metaphorically associated with God's grace (aruḷ) showering on the world. By incorporating such imagery, Guru's Malayalam poems have gained a celebratory tone reminiscent of Tamil harvest and rain festivals, where the first rains are welcomed with jubilation.

Another Malayalam piece directly influenced by a Tamil source is Sanyasīmahima (also called Niṯar Perumai – "Greatness of the Ascetic"). This is a set of ten Malayalam verses translated from a Tamil work, again likely inspired by a Tirukkural chapter (the Kural's chapter 3, Nīthaṯ Perumai, extols ascetics). In Sanyasīmahima, Guru extols the virtues of renunciation and the spiritual eminence of the sage who has conquered worldly desires. The title itself uses the Tamil word niṯar/niṭṭār for "renunciate," indicating Guru was preserving the original Tamil term. This poem introduces Tamil philosophical vocabulary into Malayalam discourse on asceticism. Concepts such as the ascetic's compassion, self-control, and divine wisdom are presented with a didactic clarity that mirrors the style of Tiruvalluvar. Through works like Vañchirappu and Sanyasīmahima, Guru effectively imbued Malayalam poetry with Tamil thematic content – be it the natural theology of rain or the moral philosophy of renunciation.

Guru's broader Malayalam corpus also exhibits numerous Tamil-derived terms and metaphysical concepts. Scholars have observed that in order to appreciate Guru's Malayalam compositions fully well, it is necessary to have one benefit from familiarity with Tamil Shaiva-Siddhānta terminology and mythic references. For instance, Guru frequently employs the term "aruḷ" – the Tamil word for divine grace – in his Malayalam writings, instead of or alongside Sanskrit equivalents like anugraha. In his prayers and philosophic

verses, phrases such as "arul nalgu" (grant grace) appear, directly borrowing the Tamil devotional idiom. This kind of choice of words shows Tamil influence on his diction, since Malayalam traditionally might use krupā (Sanskrit for grace), but Guru often preferred the Tamil/Dravidian expression aruḷ, loaded with bhakti connotations from Tamil lore.

Similarly, terms central to Tamil Shaiva metaphysics – pati, paśu, pāśam (Lord, soul, bondage), māyai (illusion), and tiruvuḷam (divine will) – find their way into Guru's Malayalam philosophical poems. His familiarity with Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta texts (such as the 14th-century treatise Ozhivil Odukkam, which he translated into Malayalam) allowed him to import a nuanced Tamil metaphysical vocabulary. As Dr. S. Omana notes, "to understand the Malayalam compositions of Narayana Guru, one should know the basic terms used by followers of Saiva Siddhanta"– a testament to how seamlessly Tamil spiritual lexicon is woven into Guru's Malayalam verses.

Beyond language, Guru's poetry also reflects Tamil cultural motifs and imagery. In his Malayalam bhajans (hymns) on Lord Subrahmaṇya (Murugan), such as Shanmukha Stotra and Subrahmanya Kīrtanam, he draws on the rich iconography of Murugan popular in Tamil Nadu – the six-faced deity with his vel (spear), the peacock mount, and the valli (creeper) imagery of devotion. The celebratory depiction of Murugan's valor and grace in these works owes much to the Tamil Kaumara (Murugan worship) tradition. We see here what could be called "festive Tamil imagery": scenes of divine pageantry, peacock feathers, sandal paste, and crowds singing – imagery common in Tamil devotional literature and temple festivals – repurposed in the Malayalam language. Even in philosophic poems, Guru uses analogies that had currency in Tamil texts; for example, he likens ignorance to darkness and divine knowledge to light in the soul – a parallel to how Tamil saints like Ramalinga Swami (Vallalar) spoke of the inner jyoti (light of grace). Such cross-pollination of imagery gave Guru's Malayalam writings a pan-Indian, or specifically pan-Dravidian, character.

To illustrate, Vañchirappu's portrayal of rain as the sustainer of life is virtually a translation of Tiruvalluvar's couplet "വെള്ളമില്ലാതെ ലോകം പൂർണ്ണമാകില്ല" (Without water, this world cannot stand) – Guru's Malayalam expands this idea into a lyrical praise, describing in Malayalam the same jubilant scenes of nature revived by rain that a Tamil poet would have created in his medium. By doing so, he brings Tamil's agrarian celebratory spirit into Malayalam poetry. Likewise, when Guru prays for God's aruḷ in Malayalam, the reader is subconsciously connected to the Tamil bhakti sensibility where grace is the central boon – as if one hears echoes of Tamil hymns in the Malayalam lines.

2.4.9 The 'Īḻam' Identity, Tamil Saṅgha Culture, and Guru's Historical Vision

In the article "Nārāyaṇaguruvum Tamiḻ Tāymozhiyum Saṅghasaṃskāra Dhārakaḻum," Dr. Ajay Śēkhar mentions that the term Īḻam (or Īḻam) in ancient Tamil signifies a collective, organised existence, something closely bound or united. The word denotes structured community life, and anything organically connected in Tamil culture is called īḻam. Plants with clustered flowers such as īḻakkoṉṉa, īḻamuḷḷa, and īḻaccempakam are examples of this linguistic practice.

In Madhyatiraṟvitāṃkūr, the term

īḻakṛṣi (collective farming) was used even into the modern period. Many ancient copper plate inscriptions from Arippaṭṭi and Alakārmala to Tarizāpalli mention īḻa-based communities and lands, pointing to saṅgha-linked communal structures.

Thus, the word Īḻam came to denote either the Buddhist Saṅgha or people living collectively within such traditions. This explains why Sri Lanka is still called Īḻam in Tamil, as it was a major Buddhist centre since Ashoka's times.

After the Saṅgha period, the people who lived in such communal Buddhist modes, particularly in Southern India, came to be known as Īḻavar. Guru's famous statement that the Īḻavar are not a caste within Hinduism but a foundational people of Kerala must be interpreted within this civilisational context.

Scholars like Ilamkulam and P. K. Gopālakṛṣṇaṉ have later explained the Īḻavar identity in relation to South Indian Buddhist urban culture (Śēkhar 2018: 61–62). The term īḻam also connects with literacy and political culture, such as in the idea of īḻakkaṭṭam (clustered villages) and mahājanapadas (republican states).

A similar semantic trajectory is found in the term Cēram (Cheram). The Cēra people were part of various clans associated with the Saṅgha tradition. However, by the 8th century, Brahmanism reasserted dominance, and those who remained outside the first three varṇas were pushed into the status of Śūdras, the fourth caste.

With the codification of Manusmṛti came ritual violence, punishments, untouchability, and social ostracism. As Ambedkar and Dr. Sugathan have shown, caste-based oppression in Kerala began in earnest when Hinduism absorbed and suppressed earlier Buddhist traditions.

Hundreds of caste-based land laws (karas), such as talakkara and mulakkara, demanding labour and bodily service from women, reflect this transformation. These penalty systems were imposed upon those who refused to submit to Brāhmaṇya patriarchy and instead followed the moral life path of Buddhism.

This antagonism between Buddhist ethics and Sanātana Dharma is evident in the rage against Bauddhas in Maṇipravāḷa literature. Modern poems such as Sahōdaran's Alari, Rāṇisaṃdēśaṃ, and Oru Divāsvapnaṃ, as well as C.V. Kunjurāmaṉ's cultural histories, are vital in understanding this legacy (Sabar 2012; Śāji 2001).

The Ayi perum kāppiyam, the five great epics of Caṅkam literature, and the aḷaimtaṇai vazhakkukaḷ (ethical customs of the five landscapes) are deeply embedded in Buddhist ethical principles like the pañcaśīla and aṭṭhamagga.

The structure of Tirukkuṟaḷ, aṟam, muṭal, and poruḷ loosely mirrors the Tipiṭaka style. In this context, Guru's journeys in Tamilakam (in 1918 and 1926), walking across towns and villages in camaṇa (Buddhist) mode, symbolised his spiritual retrieval to that ethical geography.

2.4.10 Guru's Tamil Pilgrimages and the Symbolic Politics of Travel and Access

Ajay Śēkhar further points out various aspects of Guru's connection with Tamil language and literature. Sree Narayana Guru undertook two significant journeys into Tamilakam, in 1918 and again in 1926. These travels were not mere spiritual tours but symbolic pilgrimages into a space of linguistic, ethical, and civilisational

retrieval. During these visits, Guru adopted a camaṇa-style mode of travel, going from village to village on foot, in the manner of ancient Buddhist avadhūtas (wandering saints with a begging bowl). Later, he also travelled by rickshaw, train, and motorcar. His pilgrimage to Rāmeśvaram is especially significant.

There, he was denied entry into the temple because of his avaraṇa (non-Brahmin) status, despite the fact that this temple had once been a major centre of Buddhist devotion. Ironically, the same Rāmeśvaram temple that closed its doors to the Guru was situated near Dhanushkodi, from where he would depart for Sri Lanka aboard a British steamship, a vessel that did not practice untouchability. Guru later transformed this contradiction into the poetic symbolism in Daivadaśakam, writing of the great Western ship as a divine vehicle of moral justice:

ആവിവൻതോണിയായി നീതിയുടെ പരമ പദത്തെ ഗുരു
കാവ്യകൽപ്പനയിലൂടെ അനശ്വരമാക്കി.

This "aavivanthoṇi" (steamship), ever trembling yet rising on the wide ocean, becomes a metaphor for Buddhist impermanence (anityavāda), as well as for the fluctuating yet elevating path of truth.

In 1926, two years before his death, Guru once again retreated from the Tamil world, declaring that he would no longer return to Malayalam. His statement, "Malayālattilekku ini illennu paraññu Iḷattēkku pōyi iruppuṟappiccu", reflects a forward-facing critique of Malayalam's caste-infested linguistic nationalism. Words like paśu, bhāṣā, and mātāvāda, often used in exclusivist pride, must be re-examined today through Guru's moral-ethical lens.

In conversations with Theravāda monks, Guru strongly asserted:

"Our faith also is in Buddhism."

To support this, he cited the ancient lexicon Amarakōśa, authored by Amarasiṃha, a Bauddha monk who compiled the foundational Sanskrit thesaurus in South India over a thousand years ago:

"Daśabdalō ṣaḍ bhijō advayavādi Vināyaka"

This identifies advayavādi (non-dualist) as a name for the Buddha, the true Vināyaka, not the disguised Advaita philosophers of later centuries, but the historical Gautama Buddha himself.

Guru's declaration is also a refutation of the later masked Buddhist philosophies (like the Advaita of Gauḍapāda and Nāgārjuna) that re-entered Brahmanical thought under different labels. In this statement, Guru reinforces his direct ethical lineage to the Buddhist morality.

Recap

- Symbolism is central to Guru's poetic expression
- Nature symbols reflect spiritual truths and human experiences

- Guru's use of symbolism bridges the divine and the mundane
- Metaphors like 'light' and 'darkness' signify knowledge and ignorance
- Guru's symbolic language conveys social and ethical messages
- Symbolic expressions in Guru's poetry transcend caste and creed
- The metaphor of the ocean often symbolises infinite consciousness
- Symbols in Guru's works are contextually rooted and universally resonant
- Guru employs symbolic chants to induce meditative states
- Symbolism enhances the aesthetic and philosophical depth of his poetry
- The recurring symbol of the 'path' signifies spiritual journey and growth
- Animal symbols, like the serpent, represent latent energy and transformation
- Plants and flowers in his works symbolise purity and spiritual blossoming
- Symbols in Guru's poetry often carry layered meanings
- Guru's symbolic diction integrates philosophical and devotional elements
- Cosmic symbols represent the interconnectedness of all beings
- Water metaphors signify purity, cleansing, and spiritual renewal
- Guru's use of symbolic contrasts highlights moral and ethical dilemmas
- Symbolism serves as a bridge between tangible reality and spiritual ideals
- Metaphors derived from nature reflect his deep ecological awareness
- Symbolic language makes complex ideas accessible to common people
- The sun and the moon in his poetry reflect duality and harmony
- Guru's symbolic discourse challenges rigid social structures
- Symbols from daily life convey universal spiritual truths
- Through symbolism, Guru promotes inner transformation and social harmony

Objective Questions

1. What does the symbol of light represent in Guru's poetry?
2. Which symbol in Guru's poetry often signifies infinite consciousness?
3. What does the serpent symbolise in Guru's symbolic diction?
4. What is the symbolic meaning of water in Guru's works?
5. Which natural element often symbolises spiritual growth in Guru's poetry?
6. How does Guru use the metaphor of the path in his writings?
7. What do the sun and moon symbolise together in Guru's works?
8. What does darkness often signify in Guru's poetry?
9. Which symbol indicates interconnectedness in his philosophical discourse?
10. How does Guru use the metaphor of the ocean in his poetry?

Answers

1. Knowledge
2. Ocean
3. Transformation
4. Purity
5. Flower
6. Spiritual Journey
7. Harmony
8. Ignorance
9. Cosmos
10. Consciousness

Assignments

1. Discuss the significance of symbolism in Guru's poetic expression.
2. How does Guru use natural symbols to convey philosophical ideas?
3. Analyse the metaphor of light and darkness in Guru's poetry.
4. What role does the symbol of the ocean play in his spiritual teachings?
5. Explain how symbolism aids in the social critique present in Guru's works.

SGOU

Devotional Poems

SGOU

The Devotional Poems of Narayana Guru

UNIT

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- know the historical and cultural context of Narayana Guru's devotional poems
- identify the key themes and philosophical ideas present in the Guru's hymns and verses
- appreciate how Guru's devotional works blend devotion (Bhakti) with knowledge (Jnana) and social ethics
- recognise the ways in which Narayana Guru's hymns promote universal brotherhood and spiritual enlightenment beyond caste boundaries

Prerequisites

Sree Narayana Guru's devotional poems form a vital segment of his literary corpus, blending spirituality with social reformation. Through these hymns, Guru sought to make spiritual truth accessible beyond caste boundaries, creating a universal framework of devotion. His works, composed in Sanskrit, Malayalam, and Tamil, reflect a deep understanding of the Bhakti tradition and the philosophical vision of Advaita Vedanta. They often transcend ritualistic confines, offering a spiritual path rooted in compassion, wisdom, and ethical living. Narayana Guru was exceptionally versatile in three languages, and a variety of poetic forms - around seventy-four works have been attributed to him so far, and his level of mastery in

Tamil and Sanskrit was as high as in his native Malayalam. Many of his poems were composed extemporaneously: the Guru would dictate and someone else would write it down, sometimes over multiple sessions.

As a result, slight variations (pāṭhabhedam) exist in different versions of his works. Despite these circumstances, the core message of his devotional literature remains consistent and powerful: true devotion goes hand in hand with knowledge of the self and universal love, and it must uplift society by eradicating divisions like caste and religious sectarianism.

Key themes

Bhakti (Devotion), Advaita (Non-duality), Social Equality, Universal Consciousness, Self-realisation, Compassion, Vairagya (Detachment)

Discussion

3.1.1 Classification of Guru's Works

Narayana Guru's writings can be broadly classified into five categories:

1. Stotra (Hymnal works): Devotional hymns praising various deities.
2. Prabodhana (Instructional works): Writings intended to instruct or awaken knowledge.
3. Darśanika (Philosophical works): Treatises explaining philosophical ideas.
4. Tārjamakal (Translations): Works that translate or adapt other texts.
5. Gadya Kṛtikaḷ (Prose works): Writings in prose form.

This classification encompasses all the known works Guru wrote in Malayalam, Sanskrit, and Tamil. The devotional poems we study here fall primarily under the Stotra category, though they often contain instructional and philosophical dimensions as well.

3.1.2 Guru's Devotional (Stotra) Works

Guru's stotra works (devotional hymns) are dedicated to various Hindu deities, notably Vinayaka (Ganesha), Shiva, Subrahmanya (Murugan), Devi (the Goddess), and Vishnu (including Vasudeva and Krishna). Many of these hymns were composed on the occasions of temple consecrations (kṣhetra pratiṣṭha), when the Guru established places of worship open to all castes. Through these hymns, he imbued the act of worship with egalitarian ideals. For example, at the consecration of his first temple at Aruvippuram (1888), Guru composed a unique anuṣṭup shloka

– not a typical congregational prayer, but a mantra declaring the ethical and social goal of his movement. It was the first time the Guru publicly proclaimed the aim of all his activities:

ജാതിഭേദം മതദ്വേഷം
ഏതുമില്ലാതെ സർവ്വരും
സോദരത്വേന വാഴുന്ന
മാതൃകാസ്ഥാനമാമിത്.

Devoid of dividing walls
Of caste or race
Or hatred a rival faith
We all live here in brotherhood

(Meaning: "This is a model abode where all live in brotherhood, without differences of caste or religious hatred.") This verse, encapsulates Guru's vision of universal brotherhood and remains a guiding principle of his spiritual reform.

Narayana Guru's devotional compositions are numerous, and they span multiple languages and poetic meters. The hymnal works can be grouped by the deity or theme they praise. Below is a list of some of Guru's stotra works classified by the respective deities invoked.

- Śiva Stotraṅgaḷ (Shiva Hymns): Sivaprasāda Pañcakam, Sadāśiva Darśanam, Śivaśatakam, Ardhanārīśvara Stavam, Mananātītam (Vairāgya Daśakam), Chijjada Chintanam, Kundalinīpāṭṭu, Indriyavairāgyam, Śivastavam (Prapancha Sṛṣṭi), Kolathīreshastavam, Svānubhava Gīti (Vibhu Darśanam), Piṇḍanandi, Chidambarāṣṭakam, Tēvarapaṭhikaṅgaḷ (Tamil hymns to Shiva).

- Subrahmaṇya Stotraṅgaḷ (Subrahmanya Hymns): Ṣaṇmukha Stotraṁ, Ṣaṇmukha Daśakam, Ṣaṇmatura Stavam, Subrahmaṇya Kīrttanam, Navamañjari, Guhāṣṭakam, Bāhuleyāṣṭakam.

- Devī Stotraṅgaḷ (Devi Hymns): Devīstavam, Mannanthala Devīstavam, Kālīnaṭakam, Janani Navaratna Manjari, (Bhadrakalyashtakam)

- Viṣṇu Stotraṅgaḷ (Vishnu Hymns): Śrīkṛṣṇa Darśanam, Śrī Vāsudevāṣṭakam, Viṣṇvaṣṭakam.

Guru also composed a hymn to involve Vinayaka (Ganesha) – notably the Vināyakāṣṭakam – which, although not listed above, is an important Sanskrit devotional poem addressed to Lord Ganesha.

Guru's stotra compositions are numerous, but in this unit, we select only a few representative works for detailed analysis. These hymns have been chosen for their lyrical beauty, philosophical depth, and the way they illustrate the Guru's central ideas. Through each example, we will see how Narayana Guru uses devotion as a means of both spiritual enlightenment and social liberation, elevating personal worship into a universal message.

3.1.3 Selected Devotional Compositions and Their Significance

3.1.3.1 Śrīkṛṣṇa Darśanam (Vision of Lord Krishna)

One of Narayana Guru's earliest devotional poems is *Śrīkṛṣṇa Darśanam*. It is said that during his early years of study at a place called Varanappally, the young Guru had a profound spiritual experience – a momentary vision (darśana) of Lord Krishna. In response to this mystical experience, he composed *Śrīkṛṣṇa Darśanam* around 1877. This work testifies to the blissfulness one experiences upon the direct realisation of the Divine (Īśvara-sākṣātkāra).

In this hymn, Guru attempts to express the inexpressible joy and transformation that occur when the individual soul encounters the divine presence. The tone is ecstatic and intensely personal, yet the poem is grounded in Advaitic insight. Guru portrays the experience as one that dissolves the ordinary sense of the ego and the world:

ഭൂയോ വൃത്തി നിവൃത്തിയായ്ബ്ഭുവനവും
സത്തിൽ തിരോഭൂതമായ്
പീയൂഷധ്വനി ലീനമായ്ച്ചുഴലവും
ശോഭിച്ചു ദീപപ്രഭ
മായാമൂടുപടം തുറന്നു മണിരംഗത്തിൽ
പ്രകാശിക്കുമ-
ക്കായാവിൻ മലർമേനി കൗസ്തുഭമണി-
ഗ്രീവന്റെ ദിവ്യോത്സവം.

(Meaning: The feeling of one's individual existence disappeared; the sense of "I" was gone, and everything – everything-the entire universe (bhuvanam) – merged into pure Being (sat). The melodious sound of nectar (the divine nāda) fell silent. All around, there shone the radiance of a lamp. The veil of Māyā was lifted, and in the heart's jewelled stage, there appeared a divine celebration: the vision of One with a blue-hued form and the Kaustubha gem on His neck.)

Guru describes a state where the illusory worldly multiplicity is transcended to embrace the primordial Light of inner Consciousness. Beyond the veil of illusion (Māyā), the devotee experiences unity with God in a realm of inner tranquillity and light. According to accounts from his companions, during this vision at Varanappally, the young Guru was so absorbed that he briefly lost outward consciousness. *Śrīkṛṣṇa Darśanam* thus captures the unique bliss and transformative power of a genuine mystical experience. Even though it centres on Lord Krishna, the true focus of the poem is the experience of divine unity, illustrating that devotion (to a personal form of God) ultimately leads the seeker to the formless Absolute.

The narrative describes the episode of Nanu (it was Guru's name before enlightenment), who had seen found unconscious in the nearby woods was brought to Kummanpalli Raman Pillai Asan, by his disciples. He was the Sanskrit scholar who taught all of them in the Kalari (an Institution established by him in the Gurukula system). When Nanu regained consciousness, Raman Pillai Asan asked Nanu to relate his experience and he instantaneously composed the verses in the metre Sardulavikridhitham.

3.1.3.2 *Śrī Vāsudevāṣṭakam* (Eight Verses to Lord Vasudeva)

Narayana Guru wrote only a few works praising Vishnu or his incarnations; only three of his early compositions in the Vaiṣṇava tradition are presently available: *Śrī Vāsudevāṣṭakam*, *Viṣṇvaṣṭakam*, and *Śrīkṛṣṇa Darśanam*. *Śrī Vāsudevāṣṭakam* (an eight-verse hymn to Lord Vasudeva - a form of Vishnu or Krishna) is believed to have been composed around 1884. This period marked the juncture when Guru's life took a turn toward intense ascetic practice – his sojourn at Marutvamala and subsequent consecration of Lord Shiva at Aruvippuram, which were to follow without much time lapse.

In *Vāsudevāṣṭakam*, as in his other Vishnu hymns, Guru's devotional voice is that of a humble bhakta (devotee) appealing to the Lord. These early hymns are filled with laments and prayers of a devotee seeking relief from worldly suffering. Yet, even in these pleas, the underlying Advaita philosophy is clearly reflected. Guru may be addressing God in a dualistic manner – as the devotee and the Lord – but he subtly reminds the reader that the Lord's true identity is the One

Infinite Reality that underlies all beings. Whether as a devotee yearning for grace, or later as a realised sage, Guru remained rooted in a single unifying philosophy: the oneness of Jīva and Brahman (individual and universal consciousness).

Stylistically, *Śrī Vāsudevāṣṭakam* is composed in Sanskrit in the Vasantatilakā meter. It has the tone of a fervent prayer by a suffering devotee, portraying the devotee as weighed down by the misery of Saṁsāra (worldly life) and seeking God (Vāsudeva) to remove all sorrows. The hymn exemplifies the idea that just as devotees love God, God equally loves and cares for true devotees. This mutual love is the basis of the devotees' unwavering trust that the Lord will ultimately forgive and accept even their boldest outpourings. Guru often emphasises that devotion establishes a deep emotional bond between them, where the enlightened one's honour God and devotees surrender all their burdens unto Him. Such sincere devotion, even when expressed through complaints or intimate humour, is to Guru the height of Bhakti – a state in which the devotees' relationship with the Lord is as close and forgiving as that of a child with its mother or a friend with another dear friend, with whom they mutually exchasnge their concerns.

It is possible that some of Guru's works in this category were lost or not compiled for preservation by the scribes. Belonging to a lineage of sages who did not insist on preserving their writings, Guru is likely to have written other hymns to Vishnu which are no longer available.. Those hymns in our possession clearly show a progression: from an early devotion to Krishna and Vishnu to a predominant focus on Shiva and Shakti the mellowing in later years.

3.1.3.3 *Śivaśatakam* (Hundred Verses on Shiva)

Among the many devotional works of Sree Narayana Guru, *Śivaśatakam* holds a special place for its profound philosophical underpinnings and lyrical elegance. Composed in Malayalam, this hundred-verse hymn is dedicated to Lord Shiva, not merely as a deity for ritualistic worship but as a universal principle symbolising cosmic consciousness. According to tradition, *Śivaśatakam* was the first of Guru's śatakas (hundred-verse poems), reportedly composed in a single day while he was residing at Marutvamala. Guru himself is said to have remarked that he created this work "for the welfare of the world" in one sitting.

The poem reveals Guru's mastery over traditional Malayalam poetic meters, while also highlighting his Advaitic vision. Throughout *Śivaśatakam*, Shiva is praised not as a sectarian god of a particular community, but as the all - pervading Brahman – formless, attributeless, beyond birth and death, and present in all beings. This portrayal is a deliberate philosophical stance: Guru asserts that true devotion is directed not towards a limited form, but towards the eternal, unchanging reality that Shiva represents. By elevating Shiva to the level of the Supreme Reality, Guru effectively broke down caste-based notions of Shiva as the exclusive deity of a certain class. Instead, Shiva is presented as universal consciousness accessible to all.

In Śivaśatakam, each verse merges devotion and philosophy, a hallmark of Guru's style. For example, in one verse Guru exclaims:

ഹരിഭഗവാനരവിന്ദസൂനുവും നിൻ-
തിരുവിളയാടലറിഞ്ഞതില്ലയൊന്നും;
ഹര!ഹര! പിന്നെയിതാരറിഞ്ഞിടുന്നൂ
കരളിലിരുന്നു കളിച്ചിടുന്ന കോലം?

"O Hara (Shiva)! O Lord who destroys (all sin and sorrow), even Brahma and the lotus-born Vishnu do not know the slightest secret of Your divine play. When even they are unaware, who else can ever comprehend Your true form, which dances invisibly within the lotus flower, the heart?"

ചെറുപിറ ചെഞ്ചിടയിങ്കലാറുമേറും
തിറമിയലും ഫണിമാലയും ത്രിപുണ്ഡ്ര-
ക്കുറികളുമമ്മദനൻ ദഹിച്ച കണ്ണും
പുരികവുമെന്നുമെനിക്കു കാണണം തേ.

"May I always behold Your matted hair where the crescent moon and Ganga reside, Your snake-garland bristling with power, the sacred ash marks on Your forehead, the third eye that burned Kama (desire), and Your radiant face, O Lord."

These verses illustrate how the Guru's hymn simultaneously serves as worship and meditation: the devotee praises tangible aspects of Shiva's iconography while contemplating their deeper meaning. Shiva's matted hair with the moon and Ganga symbolises the union of time and the purifying flow of grace; the serpent adornment signifies energy (kundalini) under control; the third eye denotes transcendent knowledge that burns away desire. By dwelling on such symbols, the devotee is led to reflect on the formless truth they represent.

The poetic style of *Śivaśatakam* deserves special mention. Guru employs intricate alliteration and rhythmic patterns, creating a hypnotic musicality that aids in contemplation. Recitation of the verses has a mantric quality, meant to induce a meditative state in the devotee. This shows Guru's deep understanding of his medium – he adapts classical forms not only to delight aesthetically, but also to serve as a vehicle to convey spiritual experience.

Several scholars have commented on the verses in Śivaśatakam that mention worldly temptations (such as desire for women), which some early readers misconstrued as Guru's personal feelings. Renowned commentators like Dr. M. H. Shastri and Prof. G. Balakrishnan Nair clarify that these lines were composed after Guru had attained complete detachment (paravairāgya) and Self-realisation. Thus, the verses are not autobiographical confessions, but empathetic prayers Guru put forth for the benefit of seekers who struggle with sensual desires. In other words, Guru intended that when a spiritual aspirant is disturbed by such temptations, they should pray Lord Shiva (as Kāmāri, the destroyer of Kāma/desire) for guidance and strength. The goal of these verses, as Prof. Nair notes, is to instil bhakti (devotion), jñāna (wisdom), and vairāgya (renunciation) in the devotee. Understanding this context enriches our appreciation of Śivaśatakam: it is a hymn of immense devotional rasa (essence) that simultaneously guides the devotee towards dispassion and enlightenment.

Philosophically, *Śivaśatakam* is also a subtle critique of superficial ritualism. While framed as a devotional hymn, it constantly shifts the focus from external worship to internal realisation. Guru's Shiva is Antaryamin – the inner Self of all. Repeatedly, the poem asserts that Shiva is the consciousness within every being, echoing the Upaniṣadic teaching that Consciousness is Brahman. This emphasis on the inner divine aligned with Guru's broader mission of Atma Vidya (Self-

knowledge) as the true path to liberation. By instructing (teaching) that worshipping Shiva is ultimately realising one's own true Self, Guru makes high spiritual knowledge accessible even to those who have been traditionally denied access to the Vedas due to caste barriers.

In essence, *Śivaśatakam* embodies Narayana Guru's vision of a spiritually awakened society where devotion is not bound by ritual or caste but is rooted in the realisation of the universal Self. Little wonder that this hymn is regarded as a "stotra-ratna" (jewel among hymns) – it is said that anyone who regularly recites it will have all sorrows removed and truth awakened within.

3.1.3.4 *Subrahmaṇya Kīrthanam* (Hymn to Lord Subrahmanya)

During his middle years, especially influenced by his contact with the Tamil yogi Thaikkāttu Ayyavu Swami, Sreenarayanaguru developed a strong devotional affection for deities of the Shaiva tradition, notably Bāla Subrahmanya (the child form of Murugan, son of Shiva). *Subrahmaṇya Kīrttanam* (often simply called *Subrahmanya sthuthi*) is a Malayalam hymn consisting of fifteen ślokas in the Sragdharā meter. It was composed when Guru deeply immersed himself in the worship of Subrahmanya, reflecting the influence of Shaiva Siddhānta philosophy that he absorbed from Tamil devotional literature. This work stands out for its powerful, unimpeded flow of language and devotion. Guru himself, in this hymn, appears as a wandering yogi-devotee candidly sharing his struggles and prayers with his beloved Lord. Beyond this reading, every devotee is presented as a poor wanderer in a bowl waiting endlessly for the Lord's mercy to attain liberation from the worldly beggings and sufferings to attain moksha (a state of bliss)

Structurally, *Subrahmaṇya Kīrttanam* is a prayer in the form of heartfelt appeals and occasional playful ironies from the devotee to God. The hymn begins by praising Lord Shiva (the father of Subrahmanya) and ends by identifying Subrahmanya with Shiva himself. This progression echoes the ideas in Shaiva Siddhānta that ultimately all forms (even the sun) dissolve into the supreme Shiva. In Guru's vision, Subrahmanya is none other than an aspect of Shiva, and worshipping Subrahmanya with true devotion leads one to Shiva-consciousness.

The language of the Kīrthanam is direct and unadorned, yet poetically potent. Guru's words flow gracefully, making the hymn suitable for both singing and introspection. A representative verse from the middle of the hymn reveals the intimate and sometimes daring tone Guru takes with the Lord:

ഉൺമാനില്ലാഞ്ഞിരപ്പോട്ടിയുമൊരുവടിയും-
കൊണ്ടു നീളെ നടക്കും -
പെൺമെയ്പങ്കൻ കുടത്തിൻ കവിളു കവിയുമാ-
റുള്ള കള്ളും ചുമന്നും
നിർമ്മാണം പോൽ ചിലപ്പോളരയിലൊരു കരി-
ത്തോലുടുത്തും നടക്കും
വൻമായം നിൻതകപ്പൻ വികൃതികൾ പറവാ-
നാദിശേഷന്നുമാമോ?

(Meaning: "Subrahmanya, your father (Lord Shiva) is wandering along the roads with no real goal, carrying a begging bowl made from a skull and a staff in his hands. He goes about naked except for an elephant hide around his waist, and even that he sometimes discards like a madman. Half of His body is a woman's, and He staggers under the influence of the intoxicating liquor. He carries – indeed, who but Ādiśeṣa (the thousand-headed serpent) could possibly describe the magical antics of your father's divine play?")

Here, the devotee (Guru) has grown so

close to Bhagavān that he dares to tease and lovingly mock Shiva's bizarre exploits. He refers to Shiva's digambara (naked ascetic) form, his bhikṣāṭana (begging with Brahma's skull), the Ardhanārīśvara (half-woman) form, and His inebriation in a playful tone. This bold intimacy is a sign of true devotion in Guru's view: the devotee is utterly fearless in communication because of absolute trust in the Lord's love and forgiveness. The verse highlights that the omnipotent Lord's leela (divine play) often defies human logic, and the devotee delights in it, knowing it is all the Lord's self-chosen game. Such a frank, affectionate relationship between devotee and God reflects the height of bhakti, where reverence and friendship blend.

Earlier in the hymn, Guru also presents himself as a mendicant seeker renouncing the world to find God. In a plaintive tone he prays to Subrahmanya:

പച്ചക്കള്ളം വിതറിപ്പഴവിന കുടികെട്ടി
ക്കിടക്കുന്നൊരിമ്മെ
യ്യെച്ചിൽച്ചോറുണ്ടിരപ്പോടൊരു വടിയുമെടു
ത്തോടി മൂടറ്റിടും മുൻ
പച്ചപ്പൊൻ മയിലിലേറിപ്പരിചിനൊടെഴുന്ന
ള്ളിപ്പടിക്കൽ കിടക്കും
പിച്ചക്കാരന്നു വല്ലോമൊരു ഗതി തരണേ
മറ്റെനിക്കാരുമില്ലേ!

(Meaning: "All around me I see only attachments and experiences that are false, like unripe fruits—yet I believed them to be real and built my life around them. Chasing these illusions has left me as a beggar, living on mere scraps of joy, holding just a staff and a begging bowl as my remaining possessions. In search of You, I have wandered endlessly and finally collapsed at Your doorstep. Before this body loses all strength and falls, won't You, riding Your resplendent golden peacock, come forth in compassion? I lie here as nothing but a destitute beggar at Your feet—please grant me some refuge, some path. No one but You can save me from this plight!")

This moving prayer shows Guru's characteristic blend of devotional fervor with philosophical subtlety. The "false unripe fruits" symbolise illusory worldly pleasures (born of vāsanas, deep-seated tendencies) that the seeker realises have misled him. Embracing poverty and humility ("I have become a beggar") is symbolic of casting aside ego and luxury in favour of spiritual pursuit. The *golden peacock* is Subrahmanya's mount; the devotee implores the Lord to appear on his peacock and save him before it's too late. The underlying message is that no one but the Divine can truly remove our deepest sorrows and vāsanas (mental impressions). The verse dramatizes the internal struggle of the aspirant in a way that is relatable and deeply emotive.

As *Subrahmaṇya Kīrttanam* progresses, Guru intensifies the theme of inner transformation. He prays not just for external relief but for the removal of spiritual ignorance (ajñāna) and the uprooting of all latent tendencies (vāsanās) that impede realisation. The deity Subrahmanya is thus invoked as the dispeller of inner darkness and the giver of jñāna (spiritual knowledge). In this way, Guru aligns Subrahmanya with the ideals of Advaita Vedanta: the ultimate goal is not merely to worship the Lord externally, but to awaken the "inner Subrahmanya", the spark of divinity and knowledge within the heart.

Towards the end, Guru uses a powerful chariot allegory:

ഓട്ടീലൊട്ടിച്ചു നാളത്തിരുനടുവെളി പാർ -
ത്തങ്കുശുങ്കെന്നു തട്ടി-
ക്കൂട്ടിപ്പൂട്ടിപ്പിടിച്ചക്കുതിരയെ നടുറോ-
ട്ടൂടെയോടിച്ചു വേഗം,
ചാട്ടിൻകൂട്ടിങ്കലുൾച്ചഞ്ചലതരമിളകും

പഞ്ചരാജാക്കൾ പോം മുൻ
കൂട്ടക്കൊട്ടോടു കോട്ടയ്ക്കകമതു കരയേ-
റിസ്സുഖിപ്പാൻ വരം താ.

(Meaning: "Fixing unwavering attention on You, the captain of this ship of worldly existence, and setting my goal as the supreme Consciousness (Chidakasha) wherein You dwell, I guide the horse of my mind and senses forward. Gently but firmly I rein in the horse whenever it strays, keeping the chariot on the middle path and speeding toward the destination. As the five 'kings' (the five senses, pañcendriyas) become unsteady and fall away one by one, I urge my chariot faster until, with a triumphant clamour, I can enter the citadel of Your grace and find supreme peace. Grant me this boon, O Lord!")

In this allegorical verse, the mind and senses are depicted as a chariot with horses that must be disciplined. The "five kings" that drop off are the five pañcaprāṇas or five senses losing their grip as one transcends them. The devotee strives to keep his focus (the charioteer's eye) on the goal of reaching the Lord's secret abode (the innermost sanctum of consciousness). The plea for Subrahmanya's boon is ultimately a plea for liberation (mokṣa) – to enter the fortress of divine consciousness victoriously.

Such rich symbolism demonstrates Guru's mastery over metaphor and allegory in conveying spiritual ideas. The Kīrthanam seamlessly integrates philosophy into prayer. Its musicality and rhythm make it ideal for chanting, thus serving as both a piece of devotional music and a guided meditation on controlling the mind and senses. The hymn's accessibility (being in Malayalam) and emotive appeal ensured it became popular among devotees, fulfilling Guru's mission of democratising spirituality by bridging literary art and spiritual practice.

In summary, *Subrahmaṇya Kīrttanam* reflects Guru's broader spiritual vision: devotion must lead to inner transformation and self-awareness. The Lord is depicted not simply as a war-god or a giver of boons, but as the inner light guiding the seeker through the darkness of ignorance. The repeated refrains of the devotee's plight and plea reinforce Guru's message that true devotion is a journey inward, where one's own ego and ignorance are the foes to be vanquished with the Lord's grace.

3.1.3.5 *Vināyakāṣṭakam* (Eight Verses to Lord Vinayaka)

Another notable devotional composition by Sree Narayana Guru is the *Vināyakāṣṭakam*, a Sanskrit hymn dedicated to Lord Vinayaka (Gaṇeśa). This eight-verse stotram exemplifies Guru's ability to present traditional devotion in a universal, philosophical framework. In Hindu tradition, Ganesha is widely revered as the remover of obstacles and lord of beginnings. Guru's *Vināyakāṣṭakam* honours these aspects but shifts the focus from material obstacles to spiritual obstacles, aligning Ganesha's role with the removal of ignorance on the path to Self-realisation.

Throughout the hymn, Guru praises Vinayaka not merely with the typical folkloric imagery of an elephant-headed deity who grants boons, but as the very embodiment of wisdom, auspiciousness, and inner awakening. The verses describe Lord Ganesha with epithets that highlight his purity and knowledge. For instance, Guru addresses Vinayaka as:

- "the source of all knowledge,"
- "the field of compassion,"
- "the life-giving nectar (amṛta) for spiritual seekers,"

- "the one whose lotus feet are worshipped by sages and even by Vishnu (Shrīpati) and Lakshmi."

By using such terms, Guru elevates Ganesha from remover of mundane hurdles to the remover of Avidyā (ignorance) that veils the supreme Truth. This reinterpretation is perfectly in line with Guru's Advaitic stance: true worship should ultimately lead to liberation from the cycle of birth and death (saṁsāra), not just to worldly success. Thus, Vinayaka is depicted as the guardian of the threshold of enlightenment – the one who grants passage to higher wisdom once the seeker's inner obstacles are cleared.

The poetic structure of *Vināyakāṣṭakam* is marked by rhythmic precision and melodious cadence. Guru employs alliteration and sound play (śabdālaṅkāra) that make the verses pleasing to the ear and ideal for chanting. For example, one verse might describe the tinkling of Vinayaka's ankle bells and then seamlessly moves on to praise the sweetness of his compassion, using similar sounds to link the two images. This creates a musical flow that enhances devotion and concentration. The repetitive yet graceful structure of each verse enables devotees to memorize and recite the hymn easily, fulfilling its purpose as a tool for meditation and prayer.

One significant aspect of Guru's approach in this hymn is inclusivity. By composing the Vinayaka stotram in Sanskrit and imbuing it with universal philosophical themes, Guru made the figure of Ganesha accessible to all – regardless of caste or sect. Traditionally, access to Sanskrit hymns and certain deities were restricted to upper castes alone in caste-bound society. Guru, however, portrays Vinayaka as an embodiment of universal principles (such as wisdom and compassion) rather than a sectarian deity tied to any one group. In doing so, he dismantles the barriers that had kept spiritual practices divided: anyone can invoke Lord Ganesha as the remover of inner darkness, and everyone is invited to partake in the wisdom that Vinayaka represents. This aligns with Guru's larger mission of spiritual democratisation – the idea that divine grace and knowledge should be open to every individual.

3.1.3.6 *Navamañjari* (The Ninefold Blossom)

Navamañjari is a remarkable devotional poem that showcases Guru's distinct approach to spirituality and poetic expression. The title can be translated as "Nine Blossoms," indicating that the composition consists of nine verses, each envisioned as a flower in a garland. Guru structures *Navamañjari* with simplicity and charm – like nine flowers strung together – yet each verse unfolds layers of profound philosophical meaning. The hymn beautifully balances devotional fervor with abstract contemplation, reflecting the non-dualistic philosophy pervasive in Guru's work.

The thematic focus of *Navamañjari* is on invoking the Divine as the ultimate reality permeating the universe. Unlike some other hymns that concentrate on a deity's form or exploits, *Navamañjari* adopts a more impersonal and all-encompassing approach. Guru addresses the divine principle that is immanent in everything and transcendent of everything – effectively, the Brahman of the Upaniṣads approached through the heart of a devotee. However, interestingly, within the verses themselves Guru still uses the imagery of Lord Murugan (Subrahmanya) and the devotee's relationship to Him, thereby blending the personal and impersonal.

A verse from *Navamañjari* illustrates

how Guru turns worldly disillusionment into an occasion for divine surrender:

നാടീടുമീ വിഷയമോടീദൃശം നടന-
മാടീടുവാനരുതിനി-
ക്കാടീവയോവിതരതീടീയിടയ്ക്കിവനു
കൂടീയമായതിയലും
കാടീയുമീകരണമൂടീയെരിപ്പതിനൊ-
രേടീകരിഞ്ഞ നിടില-
ച്ചൂടീദമീയ മയിലോടീടുവാനരുൾക
മോടീയുതം മുരുകനേ!

(Meaning: "I have played enough in this worldly theater of sense-pleasures and sights. Age has advanced and this body has become weak. Nothing of substance has come from all my indulgences, only fatigue. The causes behind my entanglement in this life are many, and they have formed a thick veil, blackening my heart. O Muruga, won't You burn away this veil with the fire of your grace? Grant me the boon to ride with You on Your peacock. (In other words, let me rise with You in divine ascent, leaving the illusions of this world behind.)"

In this emotionally charged prayer, the devotee realises that worldly enjoyments were like the scenes in a play ("nāṭṭu... naṭana"), ultimately insubstantial. The phrase "thick black veil" signifies accumulated ignorance or mala that covers the inner light. Murugan (Subrahmanya) is asked to burn away this veil, just as he burned the demon of ignorance in mythology. The prayer to "ride on the peacock" with Muruga symbolises the soul's union with the Divine and the victory over ego and illusion. Guru's use of the peacock (Murugan's vehicle) and fire imagery ties the abstract concept of enlightenment to familiar devotional symbols, making the teaching both vivid and accessible.

Philosophically, *Navamañjari* aligns with the Advaita Vedanta worldview. The verses consistently reflect the non-dualistic insight that the individual self and the universal Self are one. Guru invokes the divine as the substratum of all creation, the light that illuminates the mind and senses, and the ultimate refuge for the seeker of truth. One verse, for instance, speaks of the "ocean of silence" that leads to the realisation of wisdom in union with Shiva, and laments the confusing array of philosophical doctrines that often confound seekers. The devotee ultimately surrenders to the Lord, asking to be saved from intellectual distractions and given the direct experience of truth. This illustrates Guru's point that true knowledge is not merely an intellectual exercise but the fruit of divine grace.

Another verse from *Navamañjari* touches upon the futility of sense pursuits and the need for divine grace:

ജ്ഞപ്തിക്കു വന്നടിയനപ്തിങ്കൾ ചൂഡനൊടു
സപ്തിക്കണഞ്ഞു മുറിയിൽ
ശബ്ദിച്ചിടാതഖിലദിക് തിങ്ങി നിന്നുവരു-
മബ്ധിക്കടുത്ത കൃപയാ
യുക്തിക്കടുക്കുമൊരു ശുക്തിട്ടു മട്ടുകളെ
യുക്തിപ്പറുത്തു പലരും
ധിക്തിഗ്മദീധിതി സുദൃക്തിക്കുമീ വ്യസന-
മുക്തിക്കു പാലയ വിഭോ!

(Meaning: "O Lord, by Your grace—vast and silent like the ocean—I have come to the doorstep of Realisation, *where the din of worldly sound has quieted and all directions are filled with a profound calm. Yet many learned ones come with various doctrines and arguments, each claiming to remove sorrow and grant happiness. Their words are like a strain on the eyes when gazing at the sun—difficult to bear. O Lord, who art the embodiment of all that is, save me from the misery caused by these endless reasonings. Bestow upon me the undoubting clarity of wisdom in union with You.")*

Here, Guru highlights a common spiritual dilemma: the conflict between intellectual debates and actual spiritual

experience. The devotee has tasted a glimpse of true silence and grace ("ocean of silence"), but is weary of the multitude of philosophies ("many… with various arguments") that can cloud simplicity. The prayer is for liberation from this confusion and for the direct experience of truth, which Guru knows comes only by the Lord's grace, not by endless dialectics.

In terms of language and style, *Navamañjari* is an exemplar of Guru's poetic economy. With just nine verses, he encapsulates vast spiritual ideas without losing depth or clarity. The diction is precise, the meter is controlled, and there is a rhythmic cadence that makes the hymn melodious and contemplative. The structure of the composition – a series of standalone yet connected verses – facilitates chanting and reflection on each idea individually. Devotees can meditate on one "blossom" (verse) at a time, allowing its meaning to unfold, and then proceed to the next, experiencing a gradual elevation of consciousness as they progress through the garland.

Socially, *Navamañjari* continues Guru's mission of inclusive spirituality. The hymn doesn't confine itself to any sectarian story or local legend; instead, it uses universal symbols (light, sound, ocean, flower) and philosophical concepts (silence, grace, knowledge) that any seeker can relate to. By avoiding any narrow sectarian references, Guru ensured *Navamañjari* could be embraced by people of all backgrounds. It invites everyone to look beyond external differences and to seek the one divine essence present in all.

3.1.3.7 *Chidambarāṣṭakam* (Eight Verses on Chidambaram)

The *Chidambarāṣṭakam* is another distinguished devotional hymn composed by Narayana Guru, consisting of eight verses in praise of Chidambaram – the holy shrine in Tamil Nadu, famous as the abode of Lord Nataraja (dancing Shiva). But Guru's approach to Chidambaram is deeply philosophical and symbolic. Rather than merely glorifying the temple or the idol, Guru elevates Chidambaram (literally "the sky/space of consciousness" – chid-ambaram) into an inner spiritual concept.

In Tamil Shaiva tradition, Chidambaram represents the cosmic stage where Shiva performs his eternal dance of creation, preservation, and dissolution. Guru adopts this rich symbol and universalises it: for him, Chidambaram is the conscious space in the heart of every seeker where the divine dance unfolds eternally. Thus, the Chidambarāṣṭakam can be read as a meditation on the inner temple – the Ātman – where one can witness the truth of existence if one attains the right vision. The hymn opens by praising the Chidambaram Linga (Shiva's formless symbol at Chidambaram) in a cosmological way:

അഷ്ടതനു പ്രതിഭാസുര ലിംഗം
വിഷ്ടവനാഥ വികസ്വര ലിംഗം
ശിഷ്ടജനാവന ശീലിത ലിംഗം
തൻമൃദു പാതു ചിദംബര ലിംഗം

(Meaning: "That Chidambara Linga shines forth as the form manifest in the eightfold matter (earth, water, fire, air, ether, sun, moon, and jiva); it is the effulgent Linga of the Lord of the Universe. It is the Linga that is ever inclined to protect righteous devotees. May that gentle (graceful) Chidambara Linga safeguard us.")

In these lines, Guru deftly ties Vedantic cosmology to the Chidambaram symbol: the "eight bodies" (aṣṭa-tanu) refer to the five elements plus sun, moon, and the living being – indicating that the entire universe is the form of Shiva.

Chidambaram's deity is thus not just a local god, but the Supreme Being who is the substratum of the cosmos. This Being evolves into the world and also protects the virtuous, showing both the immanent and compassionate aspect of the divine. By invoking Chidambaram in this way, Guru invites the devotee to see all of creation as the dancing form of Shiva.

The *Chidambarāṣṭakam* goes on to celebrate the grandeur of Lord Nataraja's dance. Guru uses vivid imagery of light and space to evoke the experience of witnessing Shiva's Ānanda Tāṇḍava (dance of bliss). The rhythmic cadence of the verses mirrors the cosmic rhythm of the dance, creating an immersive effect for the chanter or listener. The emphasis is on the idea that the dance is eternal and omnipresent: at every moment, creation and dissolution are taking place, and the enlightened witness can perceive the still center of this dance – the consciousness (Chit) that is Shiva himself.

A key philosophical theme in *Chidambarāṣṭakam* is the concept of Ākāśa (space/ether) as the final substratum of reality. In Indian thought, ākāśa is the subtlest of the five elements and is often equated with the conscious space of the heart where Brahman reveals itself. Chidambaram, which literally means "sky of consciousness," symbolises this idea that when ignorance is dispelled, what remains is the infinite expanse of Chit (pure Consciousness). Guru's verses guide the seeker to turn inward to find this inner Chidambaram. For instance, he implies that rather than only seeking God in a distant temple, one should realise that one's own heart is Chidambaram, where Shiva dances. This is a powerful integration of bhakti and jñāna – using devotion to Lord Nataraja as a means to spark the knowledge that the true Nataraja resides within.

From a social perspective, *Chidambarāṣṭakam* subtly reinforces Guru's inclusive message. In Tamil Nadu, not all were historically allowed into the Chidambaram temple (caste restrictions applied). By shifting focus to the Chidambaram within, Guru makes the experience of the cosmic dance available to everyone, irrespective of social status. The Lord of Chidambaram is shown to be dancing in the heart of every being, so no external bar can separate a devotee from the divine. All that is required is inward-turning and devotion.

The poetic craft of the hymn is also praiseworthy. Guru's use of Sanskrit is precise and resonant. Each verse of the aṣṭakam is tightly composed, often ending with the refrain "Chidambara Linga" to remind the devotee of the central motif. The choice of meter and the alliterative phrases give the verses a dancing rhythm, as if the words themselves are dancing off the tongue in honour of Nataraja. This artistic touch deepens the devotee's meditative absorption, as the act of chanting imitates the act of divine dance.

3.1.3.8 *Bhadrakalyashtakam* (Eight Verses to Bhadrakali)

Among Narayana Guru's devotional compositions, the *Bhadrakālī Aṣṭakam* occupies a unique space for its powerful evocation of the Divine Feminine and its connection to Kerala's cultural ethos. This Sanskrit hymn of eight verses is dedicated to Goddess Bhadrakālī, a form of Durga/Kāli revered in Kerala as a ferocious yet benevolent protector. Traditionally, Bhadrakali is worshipped in folk settings, especially by communities outside the Brahminical fold. Guru's genius in this hymn is that he takes this folk deity and elevates her into the universal principle of Śakti (primordial energy), thus bridging folk devotion with high philosophy.

In *BhadrakālīaAṣṭakam*, Guru does not dwell on the terrifying aspects of the Goddess alone (as many Kali hymns do), but balances them with her auspicious and compassionate dimensions. The very name *Bhadrakālī* combines Bhadra (auspicious) with Kālī (the dark, fierce goddess). Guru celebrates this duality: Bhadrakali is at once the fierce destroyer of evil and the loving mother who confers blessings and protection. Each verse of the hymn resounds with references to the Goddess's role in removing obstacles, protecting Dharma, and ultimately leading devotees to liberation.

A representative verse (reconstructed from Guru's words) captures the Goddess in a majestic light:

മാതങ്ഗശ്രുതിഭൂഷിണീം മധുധരീ-
വാണീസുധാമോക്ഷിണീം
ഭ്രൂവിക്ഷേപകടാക്ഷവീക്ഷണവിസർ-
ഗ്ഗക്ഷേമസംഹാരിണീം
മാതങ്ഗീം മഹിഷാസുരപ്രമഥിനീം
മാധുര്യധുര്യാകര-
ശ്രീകാരോത്തരപാണിപങ്കജപുടീം
ശ്രീഭദ്രകാളീം ഭജേ.

(Meaning: "I worship Śrī Bhadrakālī – She who wears the Vedas as Her ornaments; She who is the sweet bearer of the nectar of knowledge (Vānī); Her mere sidelong glance can upheave the world or shower it with grace, creating and destroying with ease; She who defeated the great asura (demon) and delighted the maharshis (great sages); She whose beautiful lotus hands are poised in gestures granting prosperity and boons. I worship that Bhadrakali!")

(Note: The above verse is paraphrased for clarity; Guru's actual Sanskrit verses would carry a similar meaning, blending Sanskrit epithets with local devotion.)

In this invocation, Guru packs numerous attributes: Bhadrakali is adorned with śruti (Vedic knowledge), indicating she is the very wisdom of the scriptures. She bears nectar (amṛta), suggesting her words or presence bestow immortality (spiritual liberation). Her glance can both create welfare and destroy negativity – pointing to her role as both creator and destroyer. She is praised for killing *Mahishasura* (the buffalo-demon, typically slain by Durga) and for pleasing the great sages – tying her to classical Puranic lore as well as the esteem of wise saints. Finally, her hands (often depicted holding weapons or showing mudras) are described as lotus-like, conferring śrī (prosperity) and blessings. By concluding with "I worship Bhadrakali," Guru personalises the relationship – it is a devotee's direct adoration.

The poetic craftsmanship here is notable. Guru uses alliterative phrases and a rhythmic meter that make the verse roll off the tongue with both sweetness and force. For example, phrases like "mātanga śruti bhūṣaṇīṁ madhu dharī-vāṇī sudhāmoṣiṇīṁ" have a lilting quality celebrating the sweet aspects, whereas "viṣha… kṣema saṁhāriṇīṁ" injects a harsher sound reflecting destruction of poison (evil). This interplay of sounds evokes the dual nature of the Goddess even at the level of phonetics.

Philosophically, Guru uses Bhadrakali as a symbol of the ultimate reality (Brahman) in its dynamic aspect. In Advaita Vedanta, Brahman is often said to have two aspects: static (pure consciousness) and dynamic (creative power or Śakti). Bhadrakali, as depicted by Guru, *is* that Śakti – the primal energy that creates, sustains, and dissolves the cosmos. When she destroys, it is not out of wrath alone but as the remover of Avidyā (ignorance) and Adharma (unrighteousness). When she nurtures, it is the flow of Karunā (compassion) and Jnana (knowledge). Thus, the hymn's

underlying message is that the Divine Mother encompasses all polarities – terrifying to the ignorant, infinitely loving to the devotee, and ultimately one with the formless Absolute.

The social significance of *Bhadrakālīaṣṭakam* cannot be overstated. Bhadrakali worship in Kerala has strong ties to the marginalised communities (for instance, many lower-caste communities have Bhadrakali as their patron deity). By composing a Sanskrit hymn for Bhadrakali, Guru effectively elevated a folk deity to the pan-Indian spiritual pantheon, bridging a gap between Sanskritic and folk traditions. He showed that the folk goddess is as worthy of high philosophic praise as any Vedic deity. This act also implied that spiritual dignity belongs to all – a goddess cherished by the marginalized can be worshipped through the highest language of learned discourse (Sanskrit) and appreciated in the highest philosophical terms. It was a subtle yet powerful statement against caste elitism in worship.

Moreover, Guru's portrayal of Bhadrakali challenges the often patriarchal depiction of the divine. Rather than a consort or a benign mother alone, she is the sovereign of the universe in her own right – *Mahāśakti*. Guru's Bhadrakali is not confined to a household shrine; she strides the cosmos, slaying ignorance and granting liberation. In this, one can also see an empowering message about the feminine divine: the ultimate reality can be viewed in feminine form without any diminution of its stature. This resonates with the Shakta philosophy of India, which Guru respectfully brings into his overall Advaitic framework.

3.1.3.9 *Janani Navaratna Manjari* (Nine Jewels to the Mother)

Among the Devi (Goddess) stotras of Sree Narayana Guru, *Janani Navaratna Manjari* holds a very special significance. The title means "Nine-Gem Garland to the Mother," and indeed the work consists of nine ślokas, each a jewel-like verse in praise of the Divine Mother (*Janani*). Guru perceives the Mother here as Ādi Parāśakti – the primordial power and primordial knowledge underlying all existence. The composition is known for its sweetness, calm, and profound depth, a characterization famously given by the poet-disciple Kumaran Asan. It was first published in 1909 in the journal *Vivekodaya*, Prof. G.Balakrishnan Nair wrotes, it was composed on Chingam 26, 1084, on his birth day, after laying the foundation stone for Sivagiri Sarada Mutt.

The circumstances of its origin add charm to the work: it is believed that while Guru was resting at the spot where the Sarada (Saraswati) Temple in Sivagiri was later built, he was moved to compose these verses. He dictated the verses to his disciple Karuṇa Krishnanasan, who wrote them down (as recorded by Sri Kavila G. Gangadharan). This image of the Guru on a hill, spontaneously pouring out devotion to the Mother of Knowledge, gives the *Navaratna Manjari* an aura of *Āveśa* (divine inspiration). Indeed, the *poetic beauty flows effortlessly*, as if it sprang from the "inner lotus" of the Guru's heart.

Throughout *Janani Navaratna Manjari*, the devotee (Guru) envisions the Goddess as the supreme knowledge (Ādi Vidyā) and the supreme power (Ādi Śakti). There is a yearning expressed in these verses – the devotee longs to merge into the Mother, to dissolve into the original wisdom from which everything arises.

ഒന്നായ മാമതിയിൽനിന്നായിരം ത്രിപുടി
വന്നാശുതൻമതി മറ-
ന്നന്നാദിയിൽ പ്രിയമുയർന്നാടലാം കടലി-
ലൊന്നായി വീണുവലയും
എന്നാശയം ഗതിപെറും നാദഭൂമിയില-
മർന്നാവിരാഭപടരും-
ചിന്നാഭിയിൽ ത്രിപുടിയെന്നാണറുംപടി
കലർന്നാറിടുന്നു ജനനീ!

(Meaning: "O Mother, from the one undivided Self (mamati) arose countless tripuṭis (triads of knower, knowledge, known). Losing their true form, they danced in delight at the beginning of creation, but were soon caught in the whirling ocean of worldly existence. O Janani, may this mind attain the realm of Sound (nāda bhūmi), where, merged into the original consciousness, all the tripuṭis dissolve and disappear, and the pure Oneness alone remains, dancing in bliss. O Mother, in that state, even the concept of the triad is absorbed and ceases – grant me that ultimate union!")

This is a highly philosophical prayer couched in devotional language. Guru refers to the concept of tripuṭi – the triad of subject, object, and process of knowing, which in Vedanta represents dualistic experience. He says that from the One (Brahman) arose the many (the tripuṭis) and they became caught in samsāra (the ocean of worldly life). The devotee prays for the blessing to reach the nāda bhūmi (the realm of primal sound or vibration), a mystical state where the mind dissolves into the original śabda Brahman (sound-form of Brahman) and all dualities vanish. In that ultimate absorption, there is only Janani (the Mother as pure consciousness) dancing. The imagery of dance and ocean here is noteworthy – even as unity is achieved, it's portrayed as a joyous dance of consciousness rather than a static silence. This aligns with a dynamic view of the ultimate reality: the Mother's play continues, but it's understood as non-dual.

Throughout the *Navaratna Manjari*, Guru emphasizes that everything in this world, including the elements, are insubstantial – mere appearances in consciousness. He extols the Goddess as the sole reality upholding existence. One verse elaborates that all experiences related to the sense organs (sound, touch, form, taste, smell, and even speech) originate and end in Her, the chidākāśa (the luminous space of consciousness). He asks rhetorically: "Her greatness, O Mother, who can fully know it? Who can adequately praise it?" – implying the ineffability of the Supreme Mother.

Guru drives home a profound Vedantic point: *in reality, nothing in this world truly exists on its own*. Upon close inquiry, every object is just a form of knowledge in awareness, and the only true existence is the Goddess as Knowledge itself. All else is Māyā – appearances. Knowledge (consciousness) is pure radiance (prakāśa), and no words suffice to describe its glory. In declaring the Goddess as *"the vast, all-encompassing luminous space itself"*, Guru is identifying Her with Brahman (which in Vedanta is often described as ananta ākāśa, infinite space of consciousness).

The tone of *Janani Navaratna Manjari* is devotional yet contemplative. The devotee's voice is full of longing – not for worldly boons, but for liberation and union with the Divine Mother. It exemplifies the concept of jñāna-bhakti (devotion informed by knowledge). Each verse can be seen as a meditation on some aspect of the Mother's role as the ultimate reality and the devotee's aspiration to transcend duality. In terms of poetic form, the work uses classical Sanskrit meter (likely a different meter for each verse, as is common in such garlands) and weaves together long, flowing compounds – giving it a scholarly flair. As Guru's own heart was immersed in these ideas, the verses do not come off

as dry philosophy; instead, they have an almost hypnotic beauty. Kumaran Asan's description "sweet, calm, and profoundly deep" is apt – *Navaratna Manjari* does not have dramatic or violent imagery but flows like a gentle, deep river of nectar. The calmness likely reflects the śānta rasa (peaceful flavour) which is considered the highest aesthetic mood, appropriate for depicting the experience of the Infinite.

This hymn also had a social message by virtue of its content and usage. Dedicated to the Divine Mother of all, it could be sung by anyone irrespective of caste or gender. By 1909, when it was published, Guru's movement was gaining ground and such compositions would have been used in the new temples and gatherings, promoting a form of worship that was both devotional and intellectually elevating. The fact that it was composed at Sivagiri, where later Guru established a Sarada (Saraswati) temple dedicated to Knowledge, shows how *Janani Navaratna Manjari* was a precursor to that consecration – in a sense, the hymn itself consecrated Saraswati (the Goddess of Wisdom) in the hearts of his followers.

3.1.3.10 *Kundalinīpāṭṭu* (Song of the Kundalini) – *also known as Pāmpāṭṭi Chinth*

Kundalinīpāṭṭu is a fascinating composition of Guru's devotional corpus, notable for its integration of esoteric yogic imagery with heartfelt devotion. The title literally means "Song of the Kundalini." However, it's worth noting that this work was originally known by the local Tamil title *Pāmpāṭṭi Chinth*, which can be loosely translated as "Reflections of the Snake-charmer" or "Song of the Snake". It is believed to have been composed after Guru's stay at Marutvamala (a period of intense ascetic practice in the late 1880s) and before the Aruvippuram consecration in 1888. In Karuṇa Krishnanasan's notebook (where many of Guru's dictated works were recorded), it was titled *Pāmpāṭṭi Chinth*, and only later the name *Kundalinīpāṭṭu* came into use.

The very naming indicates a dual influence: *Kundalini* points to the Hatha Yoga concept of the serpent power residing at the base of the spine, while *Paampu* (snake) and the style *chinth* (a kind of reflective song) point to the Tamil Siddha / folk tradition. Guru had training in certain yogic practices under Thaikkāttu Ayyavu, but later in life he did not explicitly promote Hatha Yoga; instead, he gravitated more to pure devotion and pursuit of knowledge. Scholars like Dr. T. Bhaskaran and Muni Narayana Prasad have suggested that *Kundalinīpāṭṭu* may not be a technical guide to awakening Kundalini in the Hatha Yoga sense, but rather an allegorical devotional song expressing the ecstatic state of a devotee immersed in Śiva-consciousness. Indeed, Guru often approached Subrahmanya and Ganapati through a Shiva-centric perspective, seeing them as aspects of one reality; similarly, here, even if the term Kundalini is used, the thrust of the work is devotion to Lord Shiva.

The first lines of *Kundalinīpāṭṭu* immediately set a devotional and playful tone:

ആടു പാമ്പേ, പുനം തേടുപാമ്പേ, യരു-
ളാനന്ദക്കൂത്തു കണ്ടാടുപാമ്പേ

("Dance, O Snake! Seek your field, O Snake! In grace, witness the dance of bliss and dance on, O Snake!")

Here, the "snake" addressed is symbolic. At a surface level, it could be the Kundalini serpent (the coiled energy) being urged to awaken and dance in the field of the sahasrāra (crown chakra)

where it beholds the Ānanda Tāṇḍava (blissful dance) of Shiva. At another level, Guru often equates the mind to a serpent – restless, slithering through sense-objects. By calling out "Aadu paambe!" ("Dance, O snake!"), Guru is perhaps instructing his own mind (or the devotee's mind) to join in the cosmic dance of Shiva by attuning to divine grace.

The phrase "ananda kootthu" (dance of bliss) clearly hints at Shiva's dance. So, we see a beautiful synthesis: the devotee's mind/energy (the snake) is asked to find its home (punam thedu) and dance in tune with Shiva's cosmic dance. The underlying suggestion is that the mind finds true rest and joy only in God-consciousness. Just as a snake charmer makes a snake dance by music, here the Guru's song radiates the charmer's music, beckoning the serpent of awareness to dance in ecstasy with Shiva.

The entire *Kundalinīpāṭṭu* carries this ecstatic mood. Guru's language is a mix of simple Tamil-Malayalam colloquial words (like "paambe") with philosophical depth in meaning. The repetitive call "Dance, O snake!" acts as a refrain, drilling the idea of joyful surrender into the mind of the singer. In classical Shaiva terms, one might recall the Tamil mystic Pāmbāṭṭi Siddhar's songs, which similarly used the snake as a metaphor for the soul or the kundalini. Guru, being well-versed in Tamil bhakti and Siddha literature, is clearly exchanging dialogue with that tradition through this work.

One interpretation is that *Kundalinīpāṭṭu* is Guru's way of indigenizing the yogic concept of Kundalini into a more devotion-friendly format. Instead of a dry treatise on chakras, he turns it into a devotional dance song that even the common folk could sing, perhaps not fully knowing the yogic nuance, but experiencing a spiritual elevation nonetheless. The imagery of the snake seeking its anthill (dwelling) could represent the soul seeking Shiva's feet (often symbolised as the ultimate ground). The instruction to dance upon seeing Shiva's dance is akin to encouraging total alignment with the divine will – when God dances (i.e., when the divine play unfolds), the soul should dance in harmony (i.e., accept and rejoice in God's will).

The poem implies that for one who has established firm devotion to Shiva, "everything appears Shiva-filled". This is the state of Shiva-consciousness where all is seen as a manifestation of Shiva. So the snake/mind is told: wherever you slither (whatever you perceive), know that it's all Shiva's blissful dance – join it, don't resist it. This is essentially a teaching of surrender (śaraṇāgati) and seeing God in all.

The composition also parallels a famous theme in Shaiva bhakti: seeing the pañca-bhūtas (five elements) dissolving at Shiva's feet. Guru writes that the mind is instructed to see all elements and objects merging into Shiva's feet, just as ultimately all elements merge back into their source at dissolution. This total surrender and merging is the ultimate goal of yoga and bhakti. The message of *Kundalinīpāṭṭu* is to perceive everything as merging into Shiva and thus attain oneness with Him.

From a literary standpoint, *Kundalinīpāṭṭu* is unique because it uses a very informal, folk style (the word "pāṭṭu" itself means song, often connoting folksong). It isn't composed in classical Sanskrit or even high Malayalam; it's more rustic and hence accessible. The rhyme and rhythm likely mimic those of a snake-charmer's tune or a simple rustic dance. This shows Guru's versatility – he was equally focused on the appropriate audience or purpose. By using the folk style here, he was perhaps reaching out

to the common villagers steeped in Tamil Shaiva worship, bringing them into his fold through a familiar idiom.

3.1.3.11 *Kāḷīnāṭakam* (The Play/ Dance of Kali)

Kāḷīnāṭakam stands apart as a distinct poetic gem among Guru's Devi compositions. The very name suggests a nāṭaka (drama or play) of Kālī (the Goddess in her aspect as Kali/Durga). In structure, it follows the dandakam style – a form of Sanskrit poetry known for its length and majestic flow. Dandakam verses often run on without the usual break, creating a booming, grandiloquent effect. *Kāḷīnāṭakam* is described as flowing continuously with language, rhythm, and devotional intensity in such a way that Muni Narayana Prasad hailed it as *"a masterful poetic sculpture, unmatched within stotra literature"*. Uḷḷoor S. Parameswara Iyer even referred to it as a "Siṁhavikrāntam" (lion-paced) dandakam, highlighting the consistent rhythmic strength required to compose in this meter.

Historically, *Kāḷīnāṭakam* likely belongs to Guru's later phase of stotra writing (most of the Devi stotras were composed after 1890). Guru's devotional evolution, as noted earlier, moved from praising Krishna to Subrahmanya, then to Shiva, and finally to Devi. By the time of *Kāḷīnāṭakam*, Guru emerges as a devotee of profound depth and gravity, fully blossomed in poetic prowess.

The poem opens with an invocation that is both traditional and packed with cosmic symbolism:

നമോ നാദബിന്ദ്വാത്മികേ! നാശഹീനേ!
നമോ നാരദാദീഡ്യപാദാരവിന്ദേ!
നമോ നാന്മറയ്ക്കും മണിപ്പൂംവിളക്കേ!
നമോ നാന്മുഖാദിപ്രിയാംബാ, നമസ്തേ!

(Meaning: "Salutations to You who are the soul of Nāda (primordial sound) and Bindu (primordial point)! Salutations to You, the indestructible One! Salutations to Your lotus feet worshipped by Nārada and the others! Salutations to You who are the jewel-lamp that illumines the knowledge of the four Vedas! Salutations to You, O dear Mother adored by Brahma and all (the gods with many faces)! O Mother, I bow to You!")

In these lines, Guru worships Devi in highly abstract terms: as Nāda-bindu ātmikā – the essence of sound and point. In Tantra, *Nāda* represents the subtlest sound (often Om) and *Bindu* represents the seed point from which creation emerges. By calling her Nāda-bindu-ātmikā, Guru acknowledges Devi as the supreme causal force of creation. "Nāśa-hīne" (indestructible) indicates her eternal nature beyond change. She is then praised as one whose feet are worshipped by sage Nārada and others (i.e., revered by sages and celestials alike), and as the light that makes the Vedas intelligible, implying she is the light of knowledge. By referencing Brahma (four-faced, "nānmukhan") and others prostrating, Guru establishes that even the creators and rulers of the universe revere *Her*. Thus, from the get-go, the Mother is placed as the ultimate Deity, above all gods.

This invocation acts as the naandi (introductory auspicious verse) for what follows – a description of the Devi's cosmic dance. The entire *Kāḷīnāṭakam* is essentially describing a grand vision of Mother Kali's dance that encompasses creation and destruction. The rhythm of the poem itself mimics a dance: starting softly and building to an ecstatic crescendo, then perhaps subsiding again – analogous to the cycle of Śṛṣṭi (creation), Sthiti (sustenance), Samhāra (dissolution).

Guru's poetic style in this piece prioritises sound beauty (śabdālaṅkāra) over semantic ornamentation. The idea is to convey the throbbing energy of the dance through the very phonetics and meter of the verses. This makes *Kāḷīnāṭakam* a *sonic experience* as much as a semantic one. One can imagine devotees reciting it in a single breathless flow, possibly even as an accompaniment to ritual dance or pūjā, feeling the pulse of devotion rising with each line.

In the course of the hymn, Guru depicts Kali's dance in vivid images – perhaps describing how Her anklets chime, how Her third eye blazes, how the earth quakes under Her steps, and how the cosmos moves in rhythm. Each sequence in the poem likely corresponds to a phase of the cosmic cycle. The intensity reaches a peak representing pralaya (dissolution), and then perhaps the refrain of "Namaste" to Śivāmbā (Mother Shiva, another name for Kali/Durga as consort of Shiva) indicates surrender and the recognition of the Mother's all-encompassing nature.

The final lines given in the excerpt show a climax of surrender:

ശിവാംബാ നമസ്തേ നമസ്തേ നമസ്തേ?
മംഗള രൂപേ നമസ്കാരം നമസ്കാരം?

"O Śivāmbā (Mother Shiva), salutations to You! Salutations to You! Salutations to You! O Auspicious One, I offer reverence… reverence, reverence, reverence."

The repetition of *namaste* thrice and *namaskāram* thrice is highly significant. It's as if speech itself dissolves into pure obeisance. It mirrors how in spiritual ecstasy, after describing the indescribable, the devotee ultimately can only bow again and again. This also symbolises the devotee (or the jīva) completely *surrendering the three attachments* – which interestingly the text mentions immediately after: "The devotee ultimately realises that human beings are often trapped in three forms of attachment: towards women, wealth, and land… The devotee prays not to fall into this trap…". The thrice repeated bow could signify renouncing attachment to wealth (dhana), women (stri or lust), and land (property/pride) – known in spiritual literature as the three bonds (kanchana, kāmini, kāṁkṣā). By surrendering these to the Mother, recognising their impermanence, the devotee seeks only the eternal reality, which is Kali's dance itself.

Guru concludes that once the devotee realises the entire cosmos is just a dramatic dance of Kāli, all sorrows are transcended. This is a profound statement: the vision of the cosmic dance is not just awe-inspiring, it is liberating. To truly see the world as Kali's dance is to no longer be ensnared by it, but to appreciate its beauty and flow while staying anchored in the knowledge of the Eternal dancer. It brings to mind the famous Tamil poem *Āṭu kāraṇam āriyamā kaṇṇā* – "Knowing the reason for the dance, O Kaṇṇa (Krishna)…" – which speaks to knowing the divine play. Guru's *Kāḷīnāṭakam* gives that vision through Devi worship: know that all the ups and downs of life are the Mother's dance – then you can dance with joy and be free of sorrow.

In the broader context, *Kāḷīnāṭakam* is significant because it places Devi worship on par with Shiva worship in terms of philosophical depth. It aligns with the belief that whether one worships Shiva or Shakti, one is ultimately worshipping the same non-dual reality. Guru mirrors the Chidambaram concept (cosmic dance) in the feminine form here. This again reinforces his inclusive approach, perhaps giving a nod to the Shakta devotees that the same truth shines through their mode of worship as well.

3.1.4 Thematic Reflections and Philosophical Threads in Guru's Devotional Poems

Sree Narayana Guru's devotional poems are profound philosophical texts, interweaving Advaita Vedanta, universal compassion, and social reform. A core theme is the Divine as the all-pervading reality, transcending all distinctions, inviting seekers to look inward for God within their own consciousness.

The Formless Nature of the Divine

Guru consistently emphasizes the Divine's formless, attributeless nature. He elevates deities like Shiva, Subrahmanya, Vinayaka, and Bhadrakali beyond mythology, transforming them into symbols of the one Supreme Consciousness. For instance, Shiva in Śivaśatakam represents Brahman beyond birth and death, while Bhadrakali in her aṣṭakam embodies the fundamental energy that destroys ignorance. This approach aligns with Advaita's view of ultimate reality (Brahman) as nirguṇa (without attributes) and one without a second, reorienting devotion towards timeless, formless Truth.

Interplay of Devotion (Bhakti) and Knowledge (Jñāna)

Guru's hymns beautifully fuse emotion and imagery with contemplation and instruction, exemplifying Jñāna-bhakti – devotion rooted in knowledge. In Śivaśatakam, praise to Lord Shiva is imbued with Upaniṣadic ideas about the Self. Janani Navaratna Manjari couples yearning for Mother's grace with reflections on dissolving tripuṭi (subject-object distinctions). This unique blend inspires simple believers and philosophical seekers alike, guiding them to understand that loving God truly means knowing God, revealing God and the Self as one.

Social Reform and Critique

Subtle social reform and critique are integral to these devotional works. Guru, acutely aware of caste injustices and hollow ritualism, often subverts these norms. By composing high Sanskrit hymns for deities linked to lower-caste worship, or openly declaring in a consecration hymn that "all are one, no caste-religion hatred," he conveyed strong social messages. The universal accessibility of his works, many in vernaculars, broke upper-caste monopolies on worship and scripture. His portrayal of deities as universal principles ensured no community could claim exclusive ownership of God, asserting radical equality and oneness of humanity.

Recurring Metaphors: Light, Space, and Cosmic Dance

Guru frequently employs metaphors like light, space, and cosmic dance to denote the Divine's expansive and dynamic nature. Light (prakāśa) symbolises consciousness dispelling ignorance, as seen in Chidambarāṣṭakam (the "sky of consciousness") and lines like "You are the radiant lamp..." in Śivaśatakam. Space (ākāśa) conveys the all-pervading presence, reminding us that the true "temple" is our own awareness. The cosmic dance motif illustrates the universe as a continuous process of creation and dissolution, orchestrated by the Divine, encouraging acceptance and transcendence of suffering by viewing life's changes as part of this larger rhythm.

Ethical Living and Inner Purification

Ethical living and inner purification

emerge as vital sub-themes. While praising God, Guru's verses simultaneously highlight the devotee's need for moral integrity and self-discipline. Indriya Vairāgyam explicitly prays for sense control, underscoring vairāgya (dispassion) as crucial. Guru subtly conveys that devotion without ethics is hollow; true worship reflects in one's conduct and compassion. Poems often feature pleas to overcome ignorance, attachment, and ego, setting a paradigm: spirituality is about self-transformation, with self-knowledge and moral purification as the true fruits of devotion.

Sree Narayana Guru's devotional poetry is a multifaceted spiritual guide. It transcends conventional religious boundaries by emphasizing the formless Divine, seamlessly blending devotion with profound knowledge, and subtly weaving in powerful critiques against social injustice. Through rich metaphors and a consistent call for ethical living and inner purification, Guru's hymns serve as a comprehensive pathway to both individual spiritual realization and collective social upliftment, embodying his vision of universal oneness.

Recap

- Guru's poems merge devotion with social equality; make philosophy accessible.
- Around 70 works in Malayalam, Sanskrit, Tamil – spontaneous, inspired, multilingual.
- Compositions: hymns, instructions, philosophy, translations, prose.
- Stotras central – praise deities yet point to one formless Reality.
- "Jāti bhedam…" hymn: unity, no caste/religious hatred – vision of spiritual brotherhood.
- Śrīkṛṣṇa Darśanam: mystical union with Krishna; ego dissolves in bliss.
- Śrī Vāsudevāṣṭakam and others: early Vishnu bhakti with Advaitic undertones.
- Devotion evolves: from Krishna → Shiva/Subrahmanya → Devi (universal Śakti).
- Śivaśatakam: Shiva = pure consciousness; devotion = self-realisation.
- Composed in one day; verses guide aspirants beyond worldly desires.
- Subrahmaṇya Kīrttanam: yogi's intimate, playful dialogue with Lord.
- Emphasizes surrender; God removes deep-rooted tendencies (vāsanas).

- Vināyakāṣṭakam: Ganesha = remover of spiritual ignorance, not just obstacles.
- Inclusive Sanskrit hymn – Ganesha as universal principle, beyond caste.
- Navamañjari: nine "flowers" of yearning; Murugan = guide to non-dual truth.
- Urges burning illusion, self-surrender to the all-pervading Divine.
- Chidambarāṣṭakam: inner Chidambaram = space of consciousness.
- Temple becomes symbol – real dance of Nataraja is inward.
- Inner shrine accessible to all – breaks caste exclusivity.
- Bhadrakālī Aṣṭakam: fierce and tender Mother; folk-Sanskrit fusion.
- Śakti as both destroyer of evil and giver of grace.
- Sanskritic hymn for folk deity = honouring the marginalised.
- Janani Navaratna Manjari: Advaitic praise of Mother as pure consciousness.
- Calls for merging triads into oneness; Śānta rasa prevails.
- Short yet profound – Mother as source of all knowledge and liberation.
- Kundalinīpāṭṭu: folk-Tamil bhakti; snake = awakened kundalini/mind.
- "Dance, O snake!" – joyous surrender to Shiva's cosmic play.
- Blends Tamil mysticism with yogic symbolism for common folk.
- Kāḷīnāṭakam: cosmic dance of Kali in fast Sanskrit meter.
- Nāda-Bindu imagery; builds ecstatic rhythm and surrender.
- Kali strips illusions; dance = divine reality beyond suffering.
- Divine is Self in all – undermines caste, ritual divisions.
- Bhakti + Jnana: devotion that educates; emotion fused with insight.
- Social reform in poetry: caste critique, folk deities elevated.
- Universal terms: light, space, Viśvanātha – open to all faiths.

- Rich imagery = teaching tools (e.g., Shiva's eye burns desire).
- Tamil bhakti + Sanskrit Vedanta = Kerala's cultural fusion.
- Goal is transformation – from prayer to wisdom, from ego to moksha.
- Bhakti culminates in Advaita: loving God → realising Self.

Objective Questions

1. What occasion inspired the composition "Jāti bhedam mata dveṣham…"?
2. What does Stotra refer to in Guru's classification of his works?
3. How long did Guru reportedly take to compose Śivaśatakam?
4. What meter is Subrahmaṇya Kīrttanam composed in?
5. In Subrahmaṇya Kīrttanam, whose antics are playfully described by the devotee?
6. What does "tripuṭi" refer to in Janani Navaratna Manjari?
7. What does Kundalinīpāṭṭu urge the mind/kundalini to do?
8. How is Vinayaka depicted in Vināyakāṣṭakam?
9. What does Chidambarāṣṭakam interpret Chidambaram as?
10. What non-dual philosophy underlies Guru's devotional poems?
11. What is the language of composition of Śivaśatakam?
12. Who is the deity addressed in Subrahmaṇya Kīrttanam?
13. What term describes a hundred-verse hymn like Śivaśatakam?
14. What does "Vairagya" mean in the context of Indriya Vairāgyam?
15. Where was Guru's first temple consecrated (place name)?
16. What is the term for Shiva's cosmic dance of bliss?

17. Who is "Janani" in Janani Navaratna Manjari?

18. What primal sound is often referenced in Guru's hymns?

19. What virtue is highlighted in Guru's consecration verse?

Answers

1. Aruvippuram
2. Devotional hymns
3. One day
4. Sragdharā
5. Shiva
6. Knower, knowledge, known
7. Dance in bliss
8. Remover of ignorance
9. Inner consciousness
10. Advaita
11. Malayalam
12. Subrahmanya
13. Shatakam
14. Detachment
15. Aruvippuram
16. Tāṇḍava
17. Devi
18. Om
19. Brotherhood

Assignments

1. Discuss the historical and cultural context of Narayana Guru's devotional writings and how this context influenced the themes in his poems.

2. Explain how Narayana Guru integrates Advaita Vedanta philosophy into one of his devotional hymns (choose any example) while maintaining a devotional tone.

3. Analyze the role of social reform in Guru's devotional literature. How do his poems subtly or overtly challenge caste and ritualistic practices?

4. Describe the evolution of Narayana Guru's devotional compositions from early works like *Sreekrishna Darśanam* to later works like *Kali Natakam*. What shifts do you observe in focus, deity, or style?

5. Evaluate the use of imagery and symbolism in Narayana Guru's hymns. How do elements like the cosmic dance, light, or the "inner temple" convey deeper spiritual meanings in his poetry?

SGOU

UNIT 2

The Deities Guru Worshipped

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- understand the symbolic representation of deities in Guru's poetry
- analyze how Guru's worship practices reflect universal spirituality
- recognize the philosophical depth in Guru's portrayal of divine figures
- explore the social and spiritual impact of Guru's hymns dedicated to deities

Prerequisites

Sree Narayana Guru's devotional poetry offers a unique perspective on the Hindu pantheon, reflecting both traditional reverence and profound philosophical insight. While he composed hymns dedicated to deities like Shiva, Subrahmanya, Ganesha, and Devi, Guru's approach consistently transcended ritualistic devotion. Instead, he interpreted these divine figures as symbolic representations of universal principles, such as cosmic consciousness, wisdom, compassion, and the transformative power of knowledge. Through his poetry, Guru aimed to democratise spiritual access and promote a universal, non-sectarian vision of devotion.

Key themes

Symbolic Worship, Universalism, Spiritual Realisation, Deities, Inclusivity, Philosophy, Social Reform

Discussion

3.2.1 Deities Worshipped and Praised by Sree Narayana Guru

Sree Narayana Guru's spiritual journey, as evidenced in his biographies and early literary expressions, reveals a fascinating evolution in the deities he worshipped and praised. Initially, his innate devotion found expression in hymns dedicated primarily to Vishnu, a clear indication of his early Vaishnava leanings. However, his spiritual landscape broadened significantly during his wandering ascetic period, leading to a profound shift towards the worship of Shiva and the deities of the Shiva family.

The nascent stages of Guru's devotional expression, are deeply intertwined with his formative years. His inclination towards contemplation and solitude nurtured an early connection with the divine. Kumaran Asan vividly portrays this as: "During the midday hours, while the cows grazed in the shade of the trees, he would climb onto the leafy branches, gaze at the blue sky, weave daydreams, and habitually recite and learn Sanskrit verses" (മദ്ധ്യാഹ്നകാലത്ത് വൃക്ഷങ്ങളുടെ തണലിൽ പശുമേഞ്ഞുനിൽക്കുമ്പോൾ ഇലകൾ നിറഞ്ഞ മരക്കൊമ്പുകളിൽ കയറി ഇരുന്നു നീലവർണ്ണമായ ആകാശത്തെ നോക്കി മനോരാജ്യം നെയ്യുകയും സംസ്കൃത പദ്യങ്ങൾ ഉരുവിട്ട് പഠിക്കുകയും പതിവായിരുന്നു). This early immersion in nature and contemplation likely laid the groundwork for his later devotional outpourings.

During his time at Varanappally, the composition of hymns took its initial form. The influence of the local environment and interactions, even the teasing from his peers, did not deter his inherent devotional nature. As Kumaran Asan notes, "Nanu was a complete devotee in form and spirit at that time". The composition of a *vanchippaatt* (boat song) on Gajendramoksham at the request of the Varanappally Panicker and the mention of other Vishnu hymns from this period underscore Vishnu as the primary deity of his early praise. Pandit K.K. Panicker corroborates this, stating, besides this, it is known that he composed many Vishnu hymns. Furthermore, Swami Dharmanandaji recounts hearing about the young Guru composing devotional songs about Sreekrishna for the women of the Varanappally family.

However, the narrative takes a significant turn with the description of his *avadhoothakaalam* (wandering ascetic period). This phase, marked by restless travels and solitary meditations, appears to have been a crucible for his spiritual transformation. The meeting with Chattampi Swamikal and the subsequent practice of interaction with Thycaud Ayya Guru seem to have been pivotal. Chattampi Swamikal's instruction on the Balasubrahmanya mantra, as mentioned in his biography, signifies the introduction and embrace of Subramanya into Guru's spiritual realm. Kumaran Asan also marks this shift, stating that it is from this

point onwards that the Swami becomes a devotee of Subramanya.

Following this period, the text explicitly states a cessation of Vaishnava hymn composition and a clear inclination towards Shiva and his associated deities. Later, the Guru did not write any Vaishnava hymns. After the installation of Shiva idols, Shiva and the deities of the Shiva family became the Guru's installed deities and deities of worship. This transition is further supported by the anecdote involving Manamboor Govindan Asan's questioning of the inclusion of Vasudevashtakam among Guru's works, suggesting a perceived incompatibility between his later Shakta/Shaiva leanings and earlier Vishnu devotion.

While the early phase undeniably showcases Vishnu as the primary object of Guru's praise, his later life and works firmly establish Shiva and the Shiva family as his principal deities of worship and focus. This evolution highlights the dynamic nature of his spiritual journey and the profound impact of his experiences and interactions on his devotional expressions.

3.2.2 Shiva – The Embodiment of Cosmic Consciousness

Among the deities revered in Sree Narayana Guru's devotional poetry, Shiva holds a place of prominence, embodying the ultimate reality and universal consciousness. Guru's portrayal of Shiva, particularly in his celebrated 'Shiva Shatakam,' reflects both deep reverence and a philosophical reimagining of the deity. Rather than confining Shiva to the traditional attributes of a mythological figure, Guru elevates him as a symbol of Nirguna Brahman — the formless, attributeless supreme consciousness that pervades the universe.

In 'Shiva Shatakam,' Guru intricately weaves lyrical beauty with philosophical depth, portraying Shiva as free from desires, forms, and limitations. The deity is visualised not as an external god to be worshipped through rituals but as the inner self, the eternal witness within every individual. Guru's verses repeatedly describe Shiva as beyond space, beyond birth and death, and untainted by worldly dualities. This emphasis on Shiva's transcendental nature aligns perfectly with Advaita Vedanta, where the divine is ultimately formless and limitless.

പഴവിനയൊക്കെയുത്തിടുന്നതൊണ്ടി-
പ്പഴമൊടു പോരിലെതിർത്തിടുന്ന ചുണ്ടും
കഴുകിയെടുത്തൊരു മുത്തൊടൊത്ത പല്ലും
മുഴുമതിപോലെ കവിൾത്തടങ്ങളും തേ.

(Meaning: Your lips eliminate all the evils that reside in everyone as an innate instinct, and are opposed to the thondi fruit when it comes to beauty. Your ivory line is like beads that have been washed and laid out. But your cheeks shine like a full moon. I want to see it all.)

അമൃതൊഴുകും തിരമാലപോലെ തള്ളും
തിമൃതയുതത്തിരുവാക്കുമെൻ ചെവിയ്ക്ക്
കുമറിയെരിഞ്ഞുകുമിഞ്ഞെഴും മനത്തീ-
യ്ക്കമൃതു ചൊരിഞ്ഞതുപോലെയുള്ള നോക്കും.

(Meaning: Your divine words are pushing into my ears like a wave of nectar, making me ecstatic. Your eyes are the experience of pouring amruth, or water, on what has been burning in my mind, which has been burning for so long. I want to see you like that.)

Such verses highlight Guru's intent to guide the devotee away from ritualistic dependence towards self-realisation and inner awakening. Shiva, in Guru's conception, becomes the representation of pure consciousness, the substratum of all existence. This portrayal breaks down caste and religious barriers, making Shiva a uni-

versal figure accessible to every seeker, irrespective of their social standing.

Moreover, Guru's depiction of Shiva reflects attributes such as compassion, transcendence, and the power of spiritual liberation. By focusing on these qualities, Guru encourages devotees to internalise the ideals of Shiva, cultivating detachment, purity, and universal love in their personal and communal lives. Shiva is not merely a deity to be worshiped but an ideal to be realised within, symbolising the possibility of attaining spiritual liberation through knowledge and ethical living.

The socio-spiritual impact of Guru's portrayal of Shiva is profound. In a society fragmented by caste-based hierarchies, Guru redefined the meaning of devotion by presenting Shiva as the common spiritual heritage of all. His poetic vision allowed the marginalised and oppressed to see themselves reflected in the divine, fostering a sense of dignity, equality, and shared spiritual identity.

3.2.3 Subrahmanya – The Symbol of Spiritual Growth and Divine Wisdom

Sree Narayana Guru's reverence for Subrahmanya, also known as Murugan or Kartikeya, finds poetic expression in his Sanskrit composition 'Subrahmanya Kīrthanam.' Through this hymn, Guru presents Subrahmanya not just as the valiant deity of traditional lore but as a profound symbol of spiritual energy, youthful dynamism, and the embodiment of divine wisdom. Subrahmanya, in Guru's vision, represents the force that guides the seeker through inner purification, ultimately leading to self-realisation.

Guru's poetic treatment of Subrahmanya reflects his unique philosophical outlook, wherein the deity is portrayed as the remover of ignorance and the bestower of knowledge. The verses of 'Subrahmanya Ashtakam' resonate with themes of overcoming internal obstacles, cleansing the mind of impurities, and attaining higher consciousness. Subrahmanya is not merely a war god vanquishing demons, but rather the inner light that dispels the darkness of ignorance, fear, and ego.

The philosophical thread running through Guru's depiction of Subrahmanya is deeply rooted in the Advaitic notion of self-realisation. By invoking Subrahmanya, Guru urges the devotee to awaken the divine potential within, symbolising the transformation of mundane consciousness into divine wisdom. Subrahmanya becomes the aspirant's inner guru, leading one toward the recognition of their true self as non-different from the supreme reality.

From a socio-spiritual perspective, Guru's portrayal of Subrahmanya plays a crucial role in breaking down the exclusivity of religious worship. Traditionally, Murugan was a deity worshiped predominantly in Tamil regions and often associated with specific caste groups. Guru's hymn repositions Subrahmanya as a universal symbol of spiritual awakening, accessible to anyone irrespective of caste, creed, or background. By doing so, Guru furthered his mission of democratizing spirituality and reinforcing the idea that divine grace is a birthright of all human beings.

3.2.4 Devi – The Divine Mother and Embodiment of Cosmic Energy

Sree Narayana Guru's devotional reverence for the divine feminine finds powerful expression in his 'Bhadrakaliyashtakam,' where Devi is

worshipped as both a fierce protector and a compassionate mother. Guru's portrayal of Devi, particularly Bhadrakali, reflects his nuanced understanding of Shakti—the cosmic energy that creates, sustains, and transforms the universe. In his poetry, Devi emerges not merely as a goddess bound by mythological narratives but as the universal mother, the embodiment of dynamic energy, capable of guiding devotees through the cycles of life and death toward ultimate liberation.

In the 'Bhadrakaliyashtakam,' Guru extols Bhadrakali as a symbol of auspiciousness, divine power, and the annihilator of ignorance. The verses celebrate her dual nature, simultaneously invoking awe and deep affection. Bhadrakali is depicted as the protector of righteousness (dharma), the destroyer of negative forces, and the ultimate refuge for those seeking spiritual and worldly solace. Guru skillfully employs poetic imagery to convey the goddess's all-encompassing nature, integrating her fierce aspect with her role as a benevolent mother.

The goddess is revered not just for her protective powers but also as the guiding light leading the devotee toward the fulfillment of righteous desires and spiritual attainment.

Philosophically, Guru's depiction of Devi transcends conventional goddess worship limited to rituals and temple traditions. He reinterprets Bhadrakali as the very essence of Shakti, the cosmic force that is both immanent and transcendent. Devi becomes the active principle in the universe, the power that enables creation, sustenance, and dissolution. Through this portrayal, Guru aligns the goddess with the non-dualistic vision of Advaita Vedanta, where she is ultimately inseparable from the supreme consciousness.

The social dimension of Guru's poetic worship of Devi is equally significant. In Kerala's traditional society, Bhadrakali was often venerated by the marginalised communities who saw her as their protector against social oppression and injustice. By composing a Sanskrit hymn in her praise, Guru elevated Bhadrakali from a folk deity to a universally respected figure, thereby integrating local religious practices into the broader philosophical framework. This act of poetic redefinition served to break down caste barriers and empower socially excluded groups by affirming their spiritual heritage.

Moreover, Guru's portrayal of Devi challenges patriarchal conceptions of the feminine divine that often confine women and female deities to passive or domesticated roles. Bhadrakali, in Guru's vision, is active, dynamic, and fiercely protective, embodying strength, wisdom, and compassion. This reimagining of the goddess contributes to a progressive understanding of femininity within spiritual discourse, where the female principle is celebrated for its transformative power.

Stylistically, the 'Bhadrakaliyashtakam' is marked by its rhythmic cadence, vivid imagery, and philosophical richness. Guru's use of sound patterns, repetitive invocations, and rich Sanskrit diction creates a hypnotic quality, making the hymn suitable for both ritualistic chanting and meditative reflection. The verses invite the devotee not just to seek blessings but to internalise the goddess's qualities of fearlessness, righteousness, and unconditional love.

3.2.5 Vinayaka and Vishnu – Symbols of Auspiciousness and Preservation

Sree Narayana Guru's poetic homage

extends gracefully to deities such as Vinayaka (Ganesha), whom he presents as a symbol of auspiciousness and divine guidance. In his 'Vinayaka Ashtakam,' Guru celebrates Ganesha not merely as the popular remover of obstacles but as the embodiment of wisdom and the cosmic force that facilitates the seeker's journey towards self-realisation.

In the 'Vinayaka Ashtakam,' Guru reimagines Ganesha beyond the traditional imagery of the elephant-headed god associated primarily with material success. Instead, Vinayaka is extolled as the cosmic principle that clears the obstacles of ignorance and ego, the real impediments on the path of spiritual progress. Guru uses the hymn to remind the devotee that Ganesha's true role is to awaken wisdom and guide the seeker inward towards the realisation of the self.

Philosophically, Vinayaka is not limited to the temporal realm but becomes the archetype of the inner guide. Guru's invocation serves to direct the devotee towards recognising that the real obstacles are internal, rooted in ignorance, attachments, and desires. The true prayer is for the removal of these spiritual hindrances rather than for external success or prosperity.

Socially, Guru's poetic treatment of Vinayaka exemplifies his commitment to inclusivity and universality in spiritual practice. By portraying this deity as a symbol of inner wisdom, he dissolves sectarian barriers and presents Ganesha as accessible to all seekers. The emphasis is not on ritualistic worship tied to specific caste or community traditions but on understanding and internalising the divine qualities they represent. Guru's teachings promote ethical living as integral to spiritual progress, aligning with the universal principles embodied by such deities.

3.2.6 Universalism in Guru's Worship of Deities

Sree Narayana Guru's worship of deities, as reflected in his devotional poetry, is a profound testament to his universal spiritual vision that transcended the limitations of caste, creed, and ritualistic orthodoxy. Guru did not merely compose hymns to traditional Hindu deities such as Shiva, Subrahmanya, Devi, Vinayaka, and Vishnu as acts of conventional devotion. Instead, his poetry redefined the very purpose and meaning of worship, elevating these divine figures into symbols of cosmic principles, philosophical ideals, and ethical aspirations accessible to all human beings. Through his poetic works, Guru presented Shiva as the ultimate embodiment of cosmic consciousness and universal compassion. In his portrayal, Shiva is the formless, eternal reality that resides within every living being, urging devotees to seek spiritual liberation through inner realisation rather than external rituals. Subrahmanya, in Guru's hands, becomes the guiding light of divine wisdom, symbolising the youthful vigour and transformative energy necessary for inner purification and self-discovery. Guru's reverence for Devi, particularly Bhadrakali, expands the worship of the goddess into a celebration of the cosmic feminine, recognising her as the dynamic power of the universe, protector of righteousness, and mother of all creation.

Likewise, his poetic treatment of Vinayaka extends beyond the removal of worldly obstacles, portraying Ganesha as the supreme remover of spiritual ignorance and the bestower of inner wisdom. Vishnu, though not the focus of a single hymn, is acknowledged in Guru's philosophical reflections as the sustaining principle of the universe, embodying the ideals of dharma, compassion, and balance necessary for preserving cosmic and social order.

What makes Guru's worship of these deities truly universal is his conscious effort to strip away sectarian boundaries and caste-based restrictions that traditionally governed access to divine grace. By composing his hymns in Sanskrit while infusing them with universal philosophical themes, Guru ensured that his devotional poetry spoke to all humanity rather than a select few. The gods in Guru's poetry are not tribal deities or sectarian symbols but are elevated to cosmic archetypes representing the highest spiritual ideals. Moreover, Guru's emphasis on internalising divine qualities over performing external rituals marks a radical departure from orthodox religious practices. He redefines devotion as a path of ethical living, self-knowledge, and universal love. His hymns repeatedly urge the devotee to cultivate compassion, overcome ignorance, and realise the oneness of all existence, reflecting the Advaitic principle that the individual self is non-different from the supreme reality. The socio-spiritual impact of this universalism is profound. By making the worship of deities an inclusive practice rooted in philosophical understanding and ethical transformation, Guru provided spiritual solace and empowerment to marginalised communities historically excluded from religious practices. His hymns thus served not only as expressions of personal devotion but also as powerful instruments of social reform and human upliftment.

3.2.7 Daivadasakam: The Hymn to the Nameless God

3.2.7.1 A Unique Poet and His Universal Hymn

Narayana Guru's poetic vision does not belong to any conventional literary tradition, yet his works sparked a spiritual and cultural awakening in Kerala. His poems, though initially overlooked, have stood the test of time due to their profound simplicity and inclusive spirituality. Among them, Daivadasakam shines as a luminous example, an enduring prayer that still resonates deeply with people across generations and communities. This ten-verse hymn exemplifies Guru's commitment to unity and universality, embodying a divine appeal that surpasses religious, caste, and sectarian boundaries.

3.2.7.2 Daivadasakam and the Idea of the Nameless God

At the heart of Daivadasakam lies a striking theological innovation: it is a prayer to a nameless, formless, and attribute-less God. The hymn opens with the invocation "Daivame" (O God)—a term that is both inclusive and abstract. This singular invocation does not refer to any specific deity such as Shiva, Vishnu, Kali, or Subrahmanya, all of whom are mentioned in Guru's other compositions. Instead, Guru merges all divine representations into the universal term "Daivam," thus removing all barriers of religious identification.

This transcendence over names and forms is not incidental, it is a deliberate spiritual strategy. By offering a prayer devoid of sectarian markers, Guru makes Daivadasakam accessible to people of all faiths and philosophies. Whether one believes in a personal god or a formless absolute, the term "Daivame" accommodates all. It is, in essence, an invocation to the divine essence beyond all religious distinctions.

3.2.7.3 Unity Beyond Sectarian Boundaries

India's spiritual and religious landscape has historically been marred by sectarian divisions: between Shaiva and Vaishnava

sects, and among philosophical schools like Advaita, Vishishtadvaita, and Dvaita. In this context, Guru's choice to address God simply as "Daivame" becomes a powerful rejection of religious exclusivism. Instead of aligning with any particular tradition, Daivadasakam invites every believer to project their own understanding of the divine onto this prayer.

Dr. Bineesh Puthuppanam underscores this point in his reflection on Daivadasakam, stating that the hymn's power lies in its refusal to invoke a specific deity. It is a spiritual offering that belongs to everyone, everywhere.

3.2.7.4 A People's Hymn of Awakening

Daivadasakam is celebrated not only for its spiritual depth but also for its wide appeal. Scholars, laypeople, women, and children have all embraced this hymn as their own. Dr. Sukumar Azhikode famously remarked that while Ātmopadēśaśatakam enthroned Guru in the intellectual landscape of Kerala, Daivadasakam unfurled his spiritual flag in the hearts of young Kerala. Though often classified as children's literature due to its simple language, Daivadasakam contains layers of philosophical insight, social relevance, and historical depth. Its beauty lies in its accessibility—combining childlike innocence with mature spiritual reflection.

3.2.7.5 A Universal Spiritual Vision

What makes Daivadasakam truly unique is its universalism. It is not a hymn that asks for material blessings or divine intervention. Instead, it is a pure expression of devotion—a call to a merciful, compassionate force that is beyond name and form. The repeated use of the word "Daivame" functions as a meditative anchor, drawing the devotee inward toward the essential divine presence.

By removing all personal and sectarian identifiers from the concept of God, Guru places emphasis on the divine as a universal truth. This aligns with his larger philosophical and social reform project, aimed at dismantling caste hierarchies, religious rivalries, and philosophical dogmas.

Recap

- Guru's worship of deities is symbolic rather than ritualistic.
- Shiva in Guru's poetry symbolises cosmic consciousness.
- Subrahmanya represents spiritual growth and divine wisdom.
- Devi is portrayed as the embodiment of cosmic energy.
- Vinayaka symbolises the remover of ignorance, guiding inner wisdom.

- Vishnu reflects the principle of preservation and cosmic balance.
- Daivadasakam addresses a formless, nameless God, symbolising universalism.
- Guru's hymns emphasize inner transformation rather than external rituals.
- The portrayal of deities transcends caste and sectarian boundaries.
- Guru's devotional poetry aims at democratizing spiritual access.
- Shiva Shatakam reflects the transcendental nature of Shiva.
- Subrahmanya Kīrthanam portrays spiritual dynamism and wisdom.
- Bhadrakaliyashtakam blends compassion and dynamic energy.
- Vinayaka Ashtakam highlights intellectual and spiritual clarity.
- Daivadasakam represents an inclusive, non-sectarian prayer.
- Guru's approach integrates devotional fervor with philosophical depth.
- Guru's universalism breaks down rigid religious structures.
- Through symbolic worship, Guru fosters human dignity and equality.
- Deities are portrayed as archetypes representing spiritual principles.
- Spirituality, in Guru's view, is rooted in ethical living and self-awareness.
- Guru's portrayal of deities encourages a holistic spiritual approach.
- The use of plain speech in devotional poetry makes it accessible to all.
- Guru's reinterpretation of deities challenges orthodoxy and ritualism.
- The philosophical depth of Guru's hymns fosters intellectual contemplation.
- Through symbolism, Guru promotes inner transformation and social harmony.

Objective Questions

1. Which deity does Guru portray as the embodiment of cosmic consciousness?
2. What does Subrahmanya symbolise in Guru's poetry?
3. Which goddess does Guru revere as the embodiment of cosmic energy?
4. What does Vinayaka represent in Guru's devotional hymns?
5. Which deity symbolises preservation and balance according to Guru?
6. What is the central theme of Daivadasakam?
7. What does Guru's portrayal of deities primarily emphasize?
8. Which poetic work of Guru addresses the Nameless God?
9. What is the philosophical significance of Vinayaka in Guru's poetry?
10. How does Guru's portrayal of deities break social barriers?

Answers

1. Shiva
2. Divine Wisdom
3. Devi
4. Remover of Ignorance
5. Vishnu
6. Universalism
7. Inner Realisation
8. Daivadasakam
9. Inner Wisdom
10. Inclusivity

Assignments

1. Discuss the symbolic portrayal of Shiva in Guru's hymns.
2. Analyze the philosophical depth of Daivadasakam as a universal prayer.
3. How does Guru's use of plain speech enhance devotional accessibility?
4. Explain the role of Vinayaka as a symbol of inner wisdom in Guru's poetry.
5. Evaluate Guru's approach to breaking caste barriers through devotional poetry.

SGOU

BLOCK - 3

UNIT 3 Anthropomorphism in Guru's Devotional Poems

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- understand the concept of anthropomorphism in Sree Narayana Guru's devotional poetry
- identify the use of human attributes in depicting the divine and natural elements in Guru's verses
- familiarise the philosophical significance of anthropomorphic depictions in Guru's poetic works
- appreciate the integration of spiritual and poetic elements through anthropomorphism

Prerequisites

Anthropomorphism in literature and religious poetry is the practice of attributing human characteristics to non-human entities, particularly in the portrayal of divine and natural forces. In Sree Narayana Guru's poetry, this technique serves as a medium to convey profound metaphysical ideas, blending spirituality with vivid imagery. By giving human-like forms to divine and natural elements, Guru's works present a unique synthesis of devotional and philosophical thoughts, making complex spiritual concepts accessible to the reader.

Anthropomorphism, the attribution of human traits, emotions, and intentions to non-human entities, is a pervasive and powerful tool in devotional poetry across

various cultures and religions. This tendency to envision the divine in human-like terms stems from a fundamental human need to understand and connect with the transcendent. By projecting familiar human experiences onto the often-abstract concept of the divine, poets create a bridge between the earthly and the celestial, fostering intimacy and relatability in the devotee's relationship with the sacred. Anthropomorphism in devotional poetry is a natural and effective way for humans to engage with the divine. By attributing familiar human qualities, poets create a sense of intimacy, emotional resonance, and narrative engagement that makes the transcendent more accessible and fosters a deeper personal relationship with the sacred. While the ultimate nature of the divine may lie beyond human comprehension, the human touch in devotional expression serves as a vital bridge for faith and devotion.

Key themes

Anthropomorphism, Devotional Poetry, Sree Narayana Guru, Advaita Vedanta, Symbolism, Metaphysical Poetry, Personification

Discussion

3.3.1 Why Anthropomorphism in Devotion?

Several factors contribute to the prevalence and effectiveness of anthropomorphism in devotional expression:

- **Cognitive Framework:** The primary mode of understanding the world is through human experience. Attributing human qualities to the divine makes the abstract more concrete and comprehensible within our existing cognitive frameworks. Concepts like love, anger, compassion, and justice become relatable when ascribed to a deity.

- **Emotional Connection:** Devotion is often deeply emotional. By portraying deities with human-like feelings, poets evoke corresponding emotions in the devotee, fostering a sense of personal connection and empathy with the divine. A god who feels joy, sorrow, or anger resonates more deeply with human experience.

- **Narrative Engagement:** Religious narratives and myths often depict deities interacting with the world and with humans in ways that mirror human relationships and social structures. Anthropomorphism is inherent in these stories, making the divine actors within a relatable framework.

- **Intimacy and Accessibility:** A purely abstract and impersonal divine can feel distant and inaccessible. Anthropomorphism humanizes the divine, making it

seem closer, more approachable, and capable of understanding human struggles and aspirations. This fosters a sense of personal relationship and the possibility of direct communion through prayer and devotion.

While anthropomorphism is a powerful tool, devotional poets are often aware of its limitations. The divine is ultimately understood to transcend human categories. Therefore, anthropomorphic descriptions are often employed metaphorically and symbolically, serving as points of connection rather than literal representations. Sophisticated theological and philosophical traditions often emphasize the *via negativa* (neti-neti – "not this, not that") approach, highlighting what the divine *is not* to avoid limiting it to human understanding.

Sree Narayana Guru (1856–1928) was a visionary poet-saint of Kerala whose works interweave spiritual philosophy with vivid poetic imagery. A striking feature of his poetry is anthropomorphism – the attribution of human form or qualities to non-human entities, especially in depicting the divine. In Guru's corpus of Malayalam verses, from devotional hymns to philosophical poems, anthropomorphic depictions abound: gods and cosmic principles appear in human-like form, nature is deified, and abstract ideas are personified. These devices are not mere literary flourishes; they serve to express profound metaphysical insights in an accessible, relatable way. This part explores how Sree Narayana Guru employs anthropomorphism in key poetic works – notably Ātmopadeśa Śatakam (One Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction), Darśanamālā (Garland of Visions), Svānubhava Gīti (Song of Self-Experience), and Kāli Nāṭakam (The Dance of Kālī) – to convey his spiritual and philosophical vision. We will see how divine embodiments, nature as deity, and humanised symbols in Guru's poetry articulate the relationship between the human and the transcendent, reflecting his Advaitic (non-dual) outlook. An exploration drawing, examples in Malayalam writing from Guru's verses will illustrate these anthropomorphic techniques, and we will relate these poetic strategies to his broader philosophical message.

3.3.2 Concept of Anthropomorphism in Guru's Poetry

In literature and religion, anthropomorphism refers to giving human characteristics or form to gods, animals, or abstract entities. In Hindu devotional tradition, this often means envisioning the Divine in human shape – a concept familiar to Guru's cultural context, where temple deities and folk gods were frequently depicted as human-like figures. (In Kerala's folk worship, for instance, fierce goddesses like Bhadrakāḷi were understood as anthropomorphic forms of cosmic power.) Narayana Guru, well-versed in this tradition, harnessed anthropomorphism in his early works to bridge the gap between the formless Absolute and the devotee's imagination. In fact, many of his early Malayalam poems are devotional hymns adorning Hindu deities, employing a rich gallery of anthropomorphic imagery – though always with an Advaitic subtext that all forms point to one Reality.

However, Guru was also a radical spiritual reformer who ultimately emphasised the formless and the universal. In Ātmopadeśa Śatakam, composed in 1897, he shifts away from any literal idol-worship towards an inward inquiry into the

Self. Yet even here, he did not abandon anthropomorphic idioms; instead, he repurposed them. Human metaphors, personifications and quasi-human dialogues appear throughout Ātmopadeśa Śatakam to illustrate subtle truths. Thus, anthropomorphism in Guru's poetry is not a naïve clinging to form, but a deliberate pedagogical tool. By speaking of the Ineffable in familiar human terms, he illuminates complex spiritual concepts for the reader. As we shall see, Guru's use of anthropomorphism ranges from full-fledged divine embodiments of God or goddess, to portraying nature as deity, down to humanised symbols for abstract ideas. Each mode serves to communicate his core philosophical insight: the unity of the Absolute and the individual soul, the oneness of all existence behind the veil of forms.

3.3.2.1 Divine Embodiments

One prominent way Guru uses anthropomorphism is by embodying the Divine in personal form. In his devotional and philosophical songs, he often addresses the ultimate Reality as a person – a Devi (Goddess) or Deva (God) – replete with human attributes. A prime example is Kāli Nāṭakam (c.1887–1897), Guru's hymn and dance-drama devoted to the goddess Kālī. Here the cosmic creative force is depicted as Kālī in human form, dancing the universe into being and destruction. Guru's Kālī is at once the terrifying dark goddess of Hindu myth and an allegory for Brahman's Supreme power. In the opening āśuḥ (adoration) verses, he invokes her in intensely anthropomorphic terms:

നമോ നാദബിന്ദ്വാത്മികേ! നാദഹീനേ!
നമോ നാരദാദീഡ്യപാദാരവിന്ദേ!
നമോ നാന്മറയ്ക്കും മണിപ്പൂംവിളക്കേ!
നമോ നാന്മുഖാദിപ്രിയാംബാ, നമസ്തേ!

"Oh, Embodiment of Nāda (primordial sound) and Bindu (creative dot), the Imperishable, adoration to Your lotus feet…" (Kāli Nāṭakam 1).

He calls her "Mother" and praises her as a "pearl-bedecked sacred Lamp of Wisdom that illuminates the four Vedas" – an image that gives the impersonal light of wisdom a tangible, personal form (the Goddess as a jewel-adorned lamp). Throughout the hymn, Guru describes Kālī's actions in human terms to symbolise cosmic functions. In one verse, he proclaims:

"This whole universe is created and presided over and joyously destroyed by You, Who remain ever rejoicing and playing, making most terrifying cries, residing in the heart of my rapture, speaking words which enlighten and fill the universe to overflowing…".

Here the creation and dissolution of the universe – abstract cosmic events – are expressed through the concrete persona of Kālī who "joyously destroys" and "plays," even "crying out" in fierce delight. These human-like descriptions (rejoicing, playing, speaking) allow Guru to portray the Absolute's functions (creation, revelation, dissolution) in a relatable narrative. Kālī's dance becomes a grand anthropomorphic theatre for the interplay of life and death, fear and bliss. Notably, Guru's Kālī is a paradoxical figure: she has "auspicious qualities while evoking fear, at the same time," blending benevolence and terror. This duality conveys the Guru's view of nature's polarity – life feeds on death, and the terrible can be sacred. By giving these cosmic contradictions a human face in Kālī, the poem invites the reader to approach these mysteries with a devotee's awe.

Guru also subtly links anthropomorphic imagery to higher philosophy. Even as he sings of the Goddess in concrete form, he

hints that she is ultimately identical with the Absolute. In Kāli Nāṭakam, after vividly depicting Kālī's frightening form, the Guru asks plaintively:

"Alas! Will there be any who have the penetration of vision to realise that You are the sole reality of the entire universe?"

This rhetorical question shifts the reader from the colourful personification back to non-dualism – affirming that the anthropomorphic Goddess is none other than the one reality (Brahman). By this device, Guru uses the path of form to arrive at the formless. The devotee enchanted by Kālī's dance is ultimately meant to realise that the dancer and the dance are the one infinite Self. As one scholar remarks, in Kāli Nāṭakam Guru describes Kālī "in impersonal and personal terms, as a goddess with auspicious qualities while evoking fear… sometimes identified with Śiva" (i.e. the Absolute). The anthropomorphic form thus serves as a mirror – reflecting metaphysical principles. Similarly, in other works, Guru invokes Śiva or Viṣṇu in human-like forms only to illustrate facets of reality. Even when anthropomorphising divinity, he avoids crude idolatry; instead, these divine embodiments are vehicles for philosophical insight.

Another instance is the Bhakti Darśanam (Vision of Devotion) section of Darśanamālā (1916). Though composed in Sanskrit, it aligns with this anthropomorphic strategy. Guru defines true devotion in a highly abstract way – "ātmaiva brahma bhajati nānyam; … bhaktir ity abhidhīyate" – meaning that "the Self itself worships Brahman, none other; when the knower of the Self adores the Self, that is called bhakti (devotion)." Paradoxically, this is a non-anthropomorphic definition of devotion, denying any separate deity, though, Guru's own poetic approach elsewhere allowed devotion to a personal God but only as a stepping stone. In simpler Malayalam verses like Daiva Daśakam (Ten Verses to God, 1914), he directly addresses God as "O Lord", "Our Father and Mother", "captain of the ship of life," etc., adopting the intimate human relations between devotee and deity. These personal addresses – "ദൈവമേ! (Daivamē!) kāthukolkangu… nāvikan nī bhavābdhikkorāvin" ("O God, please protect us without ever letting go; You are the helmsman on the ocean of becoming…") – exemplify how Guru anthropomorphically casts the Unseen as a parental, guiding human presence. Such warm, humanised devotion complements the lofty philosophy: it engages the heart, making the transcendent feel near and dear. Guru's divine embodiments, be it the fearsome Kālī or the loving Daivam (God), are anthropomorphic gateways to experience the Divine and ultimately realise its unity beyond all forms.

3.3.2.2 Nature as Deity

Closely related to anthropomorphising gods is the deification of nature in Guru's poetry. The natural world – sun, moon, ocean, trees – often appears in his verses with human or divine identity. By endowing elements of nature with sentience or divine status, Guru continues the ancient poetic practice of personification to articulate spiritual ideas. In Ātmopadeśa Śatakam, for example, nature metaphors carry a strong philosophical charge. Guru frequently uses the sun (āditya or bhānu) as a symbol of ultimate knowledge (jñāna), and darkness or night as a symbol of ignorance. In one oft-quoted verse, he describes the moment of enlightenment in a striking cosmic image:

ഒരു പതിനായിരമാദിതേയരൊന്നായ്
വരുവതുപോലെ വരും വിവേകവൃത്തി
അറിവിനെ മൂടുമനിത്യമായയാമീ-

യിരുളിനെയീർന്നെഴുമാദിസൂര്യനത്രേ.

"Like ten thousand suns rising at once, the modulation of pure discrimination (viveka) appears; the veil of transience covering knowledge is Māyā; tearing this away, the primeval Sun alone shines." Here the absolute knowledge is personified as a "primeval Sun" bursting forth, and the illusory world (Māyā) is anthropomorphically cast as a veil of darkness that must be "torn away." While the sun and darkness are not human per se, Guru gives them roles as if in a cosmic drama – the sun heroically dispelling the darkness of ignorance. The reader's mind, by envisioning this natural spectacle, grasps the otherwise abstract idea of enlightenment. The natural phenomenon is thus elevated to a deity-like status: an ādityas (sun-god) metaphor shining the light of truth.

In many verses, Guru blurs the line between nature and the divine. In Svānubhava Gīti, a reflective poem on personal spiritual experience, he directly addresses a tree in anthropomorphic reverence. He exclaims:

ഒന്നുമറിഞ്ഞീലയ്യോ!
നിന്നുടെ ലീലാവിശേഷമിതു വലുതേ.
പൊന്നിൻകൊടിയൊരു ഭാഗം
തന്നിൽ ചുറ്റിപ്പടർന്ന തനിമരമേ!

This can be rendered: *"Haven't you realised anything at all? How great is this unique sport of yours – O solitary tree, around which a portion of the golden flag has wound itself!"* In these lines, the tree (tani maram) is treated as a conscious being – Guru speaks to it as "you," asking if it perceives the divine play (līlā) it is a part of. The "golden flag" coiling around the tree is an image of something sacred (perhaps a temple flag or a golden vine) embracing the tree. This surreal personification transforms an ordinary tree into a mystical participant in God's līlā. Nature is literally ensouled here: the tree becomes an emblem of the living temple of God, quietly witnessing the divine drama. By anthropomorphising the tree (as an unknowing being who nonetheless bears a golden sign of the divine), Guru communicates how the sacred pervades even the most "inanimate" aspects of nature. The natural and the divine are one continuum – a key theme in his philosophy of immanence.

Guru's use of ocean imagery further illustrates nature-deification. In Ātmopadeśa Śatakam verse 3, he writes:

ജലനിധിതന്നിലുയർന്നിടും തരംഗാ-
വലിയതുപോലെയഭേദമായ് വരേണം.

"jalanidhi tannil uyarnnitum taranga-
valiyatu pōlē abhedamāy varēṇam."

This means, *"Just as in the ocean rise great waves which, though towering, are non-different (from the ocean), so too should [all experience] appear as one without difference."* Here the ocean and waves act as teacher and metaphor: the ocean represents the infinite Self, and the waves are the myriad phenomena. Guru personifies the wave by giving it the action of "rising" and being proud (valiyath), only to emphasise that the wave is nothing but water. The wave's pretence of individuality is an illusion – a playful quasi-personality that the ocean assumes. This gentle anthropomorphism of the wave (implying it "thinks" itself separate) imparts the Advaitic truth of unity in diversity. By conversely describing the One as an ocean (a common nature-deity metaphor in Vedanta), Guru invites the reader to revere the entire natural world as the visible form of the divine. In his worldview, nature itself is an expression of God – sunlight and moonlight, forests and seas are divine embodiments in their own right. It is a poetic spiritual ecology: the wind can whisper wisdom, and the dawn can bring revelation.

Indeed, in one of Guru's lyrical expressions, he speaks of the transition from doubt to wisdom using celestial imagery:

'സംശയത്തിന്റെ നിലാവു തീണ്ടി,
ജ്ഞാനസൂര്യൻ ഉദിച്ചു, ചന്ദ്രൻ മറഞ്ഞു''.

This can be read as *"The moonlight of doubt faded, the sun of knowledge arose, and the moon (of ignorance) set"*. Although brief, this line paints knowledge as a sun and doubt as a moon, effectively personifying the abstract states as heavenly bodies engaged in a cosmic chase. The moon here behaves like a timid creature that flees when the sun of truth arrives. Such metaphors, drawn from the everyday observations of nature, gain a quasi-divine character in Guru's poetry. They allow him to communicate a psychological transformation (dispelling of doubt) in a dramatic, almost mythic manner. The reader envisions dawn breaking in the mind's sky. Thus, through anthropomorphism and personification, Guru elevates natural elements to deities of the inner landscape. In doing so, he conveys that the language of nature is the language of spirit – the two are not separate. This seamless unity of nature and the divine reflects his advaitic conviction that "All that exists is one essence." Even when using anthropomorphic imagery, Guru never loses sight of this essence; rather, he reveals it poetically, whether through a dancing goddess or a shining sun.

3.3.2.3 Humanised Symbols

Beyond gods and nature, Narayana Guru frequently humanises abstract concepts and symbols in his poetry. By presenting intangible ideas in a semi-tangible, human-like form or voice, he brings metaphysical discussions to life. A hallmark of Guru's poetic style is to stage a kind of allegorical drama in which concepts like knowledge, ignorance, mind or ego behave as characters - questioning, revealing or transgressing - thereby imparting insight. This technique of personification transforms dry philosophical notions into living images that engage the reader's intuition.

One striking example is found in Ātmopadeśa Śatakam verse 10, where Guru introduces a dialogue to illustrate the inquiry into the Self. He writes in Malayalam:

'ഇരുളിലിരുപ്പവനാര്? ചൊൽക നീ"യെ-
ന്നൊരുവനുരപ്പതു കേട്ടു താനുമേവം
അറിവതിനായവനോടു "നീയുമാരെ"-
ന്നരുളുമിതിൻ പ്രതിവാക്യമേകമാകും.

In English: *"'Who is it that sits in the dark?' – "Tell me," one man insists. Hearing this, he (the other) in turn, for the sake of knowledge, asks him: 'And who are you?' – Thus the answer to this becomes one and the same."* Guru here personifies ignorance as "darkness" and sets up a hypothetical questioner asking who dwells in that darkness. The answer comes only as another question – "Who are you?" – implying that the seeker and the object of search are ultimately the same Self. Prof. G. Balakrishnan Nair interpreted it in a different way. Humans try to know everything except themselves. However, they do not inquire about themselves. The answer to the question "Who am I?" is precisely the answer to "Who are you?" By scripting this scene, Guru anthropomorphises the process of self-inquiry: darkness (ignorance) and the inquisitive mind are given voices. The reader effectively witnesses a guru–disciple or self–Self conversation. This human-like exchange is a symbolic dramatization of ātma-vicāra (self-inquiry), a core practice in Advaita Vedanta. The abstract philosophical point – that the true "I" eludes objectification – is conveyed through the simple human act of asking and answering, cleverly personified. Such humanised allegories populate

Ātmopadeśa Śatakam, making it a richly symbolic text where even pronouns and questions carry metaphysical weight.

Guru also employs familiar relationships and roles to humanise the divine or the guru principle. In his Daiva Daśakam, as noted, he addresses God in intimate human roles: "father, mother, captain, refuge." In another short poem, Gurustuti (Praise of the Guru), he might refer to the guru as a friend and philosopher. These are everyday human roles, but ascribing them to God or the spiritual guide, Guru, dissolves the distance between the mundane and the mystical. The transcendent dons a human face – as a caring parent or a guiding teacher – so that devotees can form a personal connection. This democratisation of spiritual symbolism was key to Guru's mission of making spirituality egalitarian. By singing of a God who "talks in our language" so to speak, he challenged the notion that the divine is distant or different from us. Anthropomorphic tenderness in his lyrics – e.g. referring to God's "compassionate hands" or "beautiful feet" – underscores the bhakti (devotional) element in his aesthetics, even as his philosophy remained staunchly non-dual.

Even inanimate symbols come alive in Guru's verses. A fine illustration is his consecration of a mirror as an idol at Aruvippuram, which he justified in symbolic verse. The mirror (a symbol of self-reflection) was essentially treated as the deity. Though a mirror is not human, Guru's poetic imagination might describe it as if it "reveals the face of truth" or "stands in silence witnessing all" – again, attributing agency and purpose to an object. In Svānubhava Gīti, as we saw, he addresses a flagstaff-like tree as an ignorant witness of divine play. Likewise, in some verses he portrays the mind as a wild creature to be tamed, or ego as a thief in the dark.

For instance, he could suggest that māyā (illusion) "hides" like a mischievous child, or that the senses are like "five birds" flitting about (an image he indeed uses in Ātmopadeśa Śatakam verse 8 where the five sense experiences are metaphorically described in playful terms). By humanising these faculties and principles, Guru turns an internal philosophical discourse into a relatable story or scene. The reader can envision controlling a rogue mind as one might gentle a wild horse, or recognizing illusion as one would expose a deceiver. In essence, all of creation – material or immaterial – becomes animated in Guru's poetic universe, each with its role in the soul's journey.

Crucially, Guru's humanised symbols are not idle fantasies; they consistently point back to his philosophical outlook. He was deeply rooted in Advaita Vedanta, which asserts the unity of the individual soul (jīva) with the absolute consciousness (Brahman). By anthropomorphising symbols, Guru teaches that everything we encounter – whether a tree, a ray of light, or a feeling in the mind – can be viewed as an expression of the one Self in us. The humanisation of non-human elements erases the hierarchy between "living" and "non-living," "sentient" and "insentient." In Guru's poetic vision, the entire cosmos is alive, conscious, and suffused with the Self. The One speaks through many mouths. Thus, even when a verse reads like a simple address to a tree or a dialogue in the dark, there is an underlying advaitic message: the same ātman (Self) is present in the questioner, the answerer, the light, the darkness, and even in the tree that doesn't know its own divine role.

One of Narayana Guru's early works is the *Bhadrakalyashtakam*. Traditionally, its content describes Bhadrakali as devotees imagine her. Each verse concludes with the words 'Sree Bhadrakalim Bhaje' (I

worship or meditate on Sree Bhadrakali). The remaining parts solely depict the form of the goddess he meditates upon.

In terms of a plea, the only instance is in the seventh verse: '(please) remove (sorrows) for me'. This very request is a common primary prayer among those who devotedly worship the singular God or various deities. The gentle aspect of the goddess is prioritised here. Nevertheless, a terrifying and fierce form is also described in one verse (verse 2).

It's noticeable that the deities are given human-like forms, even with some features un natural of humans. For example, the goddess's four arms, Subrahmanya's six heads, Brahma's four heads, and Ganapati's elephant head. Here, the Kali aspect as envisioned for the goddess is what is being described. In that form too, Guru has depicted all the traditionally accepted symbolic characteristics, along with some poetic conceits that have been passed down among great poets.

From the third verse onwards, the description is of the gentle and blissful form of the goddess. Beneath a crown shining like the light of countless morning suns lies a beautiful cluster of short curls, possessing the brilliance of curved knives meant to cut through the despicable forest of worldly existence. She who possesses the beauty of a mirage in the desert, who is skilled in playing the veena, who bestows supreme bliss, who has eyes as beautiful as lotus flowers, I worship that Sree Bhadrakali, the Mother of the Universe. The subsequent five verses also exude the maternal aspect of the goddess. Along with this, Guru portrays the goddess's otherworldly beauty. The hymn concludes: I worship Bhadrakali, who showers nectar, in words overflowing with sweetness, who performs creation, sustenance, and destruction with her eyebrows, who killed Mahishasura, who has lotus-like hands, who is the mother of Ganapati and Subrahmanya, who has radiant eyes, who is worshipped even by Brahma, who is the river of bliss, who is the swan for the lotus that is the devotee's heart, who has full, high, and heavy breasts, who shines with *kurikkootu* (auspicious marks vermition on the forehead), who has jewels adorned on her silken-clad hips, who gleams with the beauty of the lotus in the well that is her navel, who has a dark complexion like a rain cloud, who shares *kumkum* (vermilion) and *bhasmam* (sacred ash) mutually with Shiva, and who has a tress of hair as dark as a rain cloud.

3.3.3 Daivadasakam: Divine as the Collective Lifeboat

Daivadaśakam: The God Who Boarded the Lifeboat and the Liberated People

In "Daivadaśakam: Āvikkaṟappalilettiya Daivavum Vimōcitaraaya Janatayum", Dr. Bineesh Puthuppanam mentions that prayer is often individualistic and rooted in svārtha lābhēcchayil adhiṣṭhitam (selfish desires for gain). Typically, humans pray before God to preserve or gain personal interests. Words like 'me', 'mine', and 'for me' (ennuṭe, enikku, ennekkāyuḷḷa) are all synonymous with svārthatayā (സ്വാർത്ഥതയാ)(self-centeredness).

Dr. Bineesh Puthuppanam states that prayer, in common practice, often appears individualistic and profoundly rooted in svārtha lābhēcchayil adhiṣṭhitam (selfish desires for gain). Humans typically approach the divine with petitions aimed at preserving or acquiring personal interests. The frequent use of terms like 'me,' 'mine,' and 'for me' (എന്റെ, എനിക്ക്, എനിക്കായിട്ടുള്ള) in such prayers directly

aligns with, and indeed is synonymous with, svārthatayā (സ്വാർത്ഥതയാ), or self-centeredness.

However, Daivadaśakam begins by renouncing all individual desires and embraces the collective with the line that begins with 'ñaṅṅaḷ' (ഞങ്ങൾ) (we/us), representing all beings. The prayer is not to protect 'me' or 'my possessions', but rather, 'ñaṅṅaḷe kaivīṭātē kāttu koḷḷēṇam' (ഞങ്ങളെ കൈവിടാതെ കാത്തുകൊള്ളണം) — protect us without forsaking anyone.

Who are this 'us' (ñaṅṅaḷ)? Not just humans, but grass, worms, flowers—samasta jīvajālaṅṅaḷ (all living beings)—constitute this collective. From ants to whales, all are included. Guru seeks to preserve the ēkatvaṁ (unity) embedded in this vaividhyaṁ (diversity).

As Vallathol once beautifully wrote:

ലോകമേ തറവാട് തനിക്കീ ചെടികളും
പുൽകളും പുഴുക്കളും കൂടിത്തൻ കുടും
ബക്കാർ'

This concept of a 'lōkaṁāya taravāṭu' (ലോകമായ തറവാട്) (world as an ancestral home) filled with plants and worms is the vision Guru also shares. Daivadaśakam echoes this sentiment: 'yatra viśvaṁ bhavati ēka nīḍaṁ', imagining the world as a single pakṣikkuṭu (പക്ഷിക്കൂട്) (bird's nest), a universal humanistic vision.

Breaking down the dominating notion of 'ñān' (ഞാൻ) (I), the post-Renaissance emergence of 'ñaṅṅaḷ' (we) signals a new people's consciousness. The privileged unity of religion and priesthood was shattered through the empowerment of the collective 'we'. Even the democratic spirit of the French Revolution was founded on such notions of peoplehood (universal brotherhood).

The phrase 'നമ്മൾ ജനങ്ങൾ' (we-the-people) is not just poetic—it reasserts the immortal principle of samatvaṁ (equality): all are equal. In Daivadaśakam, the word 'ñaṅṅaḷ daḷ' signifies this democratic and universal assertion. There is brotherhood only if 'we' exist. There is shared humanity only when 'ñaṅṅaḷ' exists.

The idea that 'God belongs equally to us'—that God is us—is subtly indicated in these lines. There aren't separate gods for each caste. Rather, oru dēvaṁ, oru jāti, oru matam (one God, one caste, one religion) belongs to all humanity. Daivadaśakam affirms and internalizes this vision.

3.3.4 Jeevakāruṇya Pañcakam

In "Nārāyaṇaguruvum Tamiḻ Tāymozhiyum Saṅghasaṁskāra Dhārakaḷum" (നാരായണഗുരുവും തമിഴ് തായ്മൊഴിയും സംഘസംസ്കാര ധാരകരും), Dr. Ajay Sekhar sates that 'Jeevakāruṇya Pañcakam' is a five-verse poetic work written in the style of didactic instruction (sāropadeśēna ezhutiya oru anushāsanakṛti - സാരോപദേശേന എഴുതിയ ഒരു അനുശാസനകൃതി), notable for its beautiful and profound opening. This poetic piece can be viewed as a culmination of Nārāyaṇa Guru's philosophical and ethical message. Often reduced by superficial readings to mere advocacy of vegetarianism, the poem, upon deeper reflection, radiates the essence of mahā maitri (great compassion). It was composed in the year 1914 (Bhāskaran 1905: 500).

The time of composition was a violent era marked by brutal caste riots. Heroic social and political protests led by Ayyankāli for education and human rights were unfolding, alongside agrarian strikes. It must also be remembered that caste-rebellions had already taken root in Kerala with events related to Āraṭṭupuzha Velayudha Panicker in the 1850s, the Dalavākkuḷam massacre in 1806, and the

Naṅṅēli sacrifice in 1803. Violent conflicts broke out between the Pulayas and Nāyars, as well as between Īzhavas and Nāyars.

The violent unrests involving caste clashes and killings, might have prompted Guru to compose Jeevakāruṇya Pañcakam with profound compassion, seeking to restore peace, particularly in the region of Travancore. His message was clear: beatings, killings, and all forms of violence are not befitting of humanity. He declared that the killer, the one who teaches to kill, and even the religions and gods who justify such violence are devoid of any sanctity or refuge. Guru equates such behaviour as mṛgatulyatā (animal-like tendencies).

He explicitly criticizes the religious doctrines that, under the guise of varṇadharma (caste duty), prescribe violence. This is not a mere rejection of vegetarianism, but a strong ethical indictment of naramedha (ritual human sacrifice). Guru critiques the kṣatriya dharma (warrior ethic) that teaches even the killing of brothers and grandfathers without hesitation, calling it kuladharma or svadharma (inherited or self-duty), and exposes how such ideologies are entrenched in the Bhagavad Gītā.

This poem stands as one of the most peaceful yet ethically rigorous critiques of the moral values in the Gītā. It compels the reader to recall the question posed by M.V. Devān (Māṭhattil Vāṇu Dēvan): 'Does Guru accept the Gītā as authoritative?'

3.3.5 Word and Speaker: The Poetic Experience in Sreenarayanaguru's Works

In "Vākkuṁ Vaktāvum: Śrīnārāyaṇa Racanakaḷile Kāvyānubhavam" (വാക്കും വക്താവും: ശ്രീനാരായണരചനകളിലെ കാവ്യാനുഭവം), Udayakumar states that in works like 'Anukampādaśakam', one sees a unique worldview where human life is situated within the world of other living beings. The emphasis here is not on the human life that prides itself on buddhi (intellect) and yukti (rationality). Instead, the human is positioned among the jīvajālaṅṅaḷ (creatures) of the animal world.

There are several observations by Guru that reflect his view of human beings not as a superior species, but as one among many. For instance, almost every animal recognises its own kind. But man is the only creature unable to do so, having become trapped in the illusion of caste differences (jātibhedam). In this context, man becomes the seat of avidyā (ignorance). Guru's reimagining of the human being introduces a presence of eḷima (humility), a simplicity grounded in shared existence.

Guru's reflections on buddhi (intellect) and bhāṣaṇa (speech), which are often seen as distinguishing humans from animals, also consider the uttaravāditvaṁ (responsibility) that comes along with these faculties. These are not just privileges, but ethical responsibilities.

It is said that Guru was even ready to ride in a human-pulled rickshaw when necessary, instead of using a horse-cart. This indicates his willingness to accept the yaatana (suffering) of such labour if necessity demanded it. A human who pulls a rickshaw with sva-bodhaṁ (self-awareness) and volition, Guru seems to suggest, bears the burden of that work not merely physically but ethically.

3.3.6 Metaphysical Insights and Philosophical Synthesis

Narayana Guru's anthropomorphic techniques are ultimately in service of his metaphysical and spiritual insights. By couching high philosophy in concrete imagery, he achieves a unique synthesis of bhakti (devotion) and jñāna (wisdom). The use of anthropomorphism does not dilute his philosophy; on the contrary, it embodies it in memorable forms. Each anthropomorphic trope in his poetry carries a facet of his philosophical outlook:

Unity in Diversity: Anthropomorphic depictions often lead to the recognition of oneness. The many gods and goddesses in his poems are facets of one reality, as explicitly stated in Kāli Nāṭakam and Darśanamālā. The reader moved by the personal form is gently guided to the impersonal truth that "there is nothing apart from the One". Guru thus uses form to transcend form, echoing the Upaniṣadic idea that Brahman, though formless, can manifest in any form to bless the devotee.

Immanence of the Divine: By personifying nature and infusing the mundane with divinity, Guru affirms a pantheistic or panentheistic vision – that the universe is pervaded by the divine. The sun that rises within us, the tree that unknowingly partakes in God's play, the waves that are one with the ocean – all these images reinforce that the Divine is not confined to heaven but lives in and as the world. They are used to substantiate to his advaitic stance that Brahman alone is real and what is substantiate is only the Brahman. As one critic observes, Guru "uses the terms Ātma, Arivu (knowledge), Consciousness, Karu (causal womb) and God to denote the one Reality" in his writings. In poetry, these concepts come alive through anthropomorphic symbolism.

Didactic Clarity: Guru's personifications also have a didactic clarity. A philosophical maxim like "overcome ignorance with knowledge" is abstract; instead, Guru shows a thousand suns dispelling darkness or the moon of doubt giving way to the sun of wisdom. These intuitive visuals ensure the teaching is felt, not just understood intellectually. The learner can picture enlightenment as a dawn in the heart, rather than a dry syllogism. This pedagogical genius – speaking to the psyche through archetypes – is at the heart of Guru's poetic appeal.

Emotional Engagement: Anthropomorphism also invites an emotional response, which Guru saw as essential for holistic spiritual growth. When God is a mother or father, the devotee feels love and trust; when ignorance is a foe, the seeker feels courage to conquer it; when the Self is a playmate hiding in the dark, the aspirant feels curiosity and wonder. Such emotional colouring, in a controlled way, accelerates understanding. Guru famously combined "the theistic Vedic practice of love and service with the Advaita Vedanta notion of oneness". His poetry exemplifies this blend – the heart and the head are both addressed through anthropomorphic imagery that is at once endearing and enlightening.

In conclusion, anthropomorphism in Sree Narayana Guru's poetry is a bridge between the human and the divine, the visible and the invisible. It allowed him to convey the highest truths of Advaita Vedanta in the lilting cadences of Malayalam, enriched with the symbols of Kathakali dance, temple legends, and natural beauty familiar to his audience. Whether through a dancing goddess, a questioning sage, a speaking tree, or the radiance of ten thousand suns, Guru's verses continually personify the cosmic in the personal. This not only reflects the

core of his philosophy – that the personal soul is ultimately the cosmic soul – but also makes the journey to realisation an aesthetic and accessible experience. The anthropomorphic images in Guru's poems act as divine metaphors: they are fingers pointing to the moon of Truth. If we admire the graceful finger (the poetic form) but also follow its direction, we are led to the formless light beyond. In Guru's own words, "All the gods, elements, individuals – all of everything – are nothing more than moving aspects comprising the body of the one unmoving substratum". His anthropomorphic poetry beckons us to see that one substratum – the infinite – smiling at us through every face and form.

Recap

- Anthropomorphism as a poetic device in Guru's works.
- Depiction of divine forms as human-like figures.
- Nature personified as divine entities.
- Humanised symbols conveying metaphysical insights.
- Use of anthropomorphism to explain spiritual ideas.
- Examples from Kāli Nāṭakam and Daiva Daśakam.
- Advaita philosophy reflected in humanised forms.
- Divine embodiments blending myth and philosophy.
- Pedagogical purpose of anthropomorphic representations.
- Metaphors linking natural elements with spiritual awakening.
- Role of emotional engagement in poetic expressions.
- Humanising abstract concepts for philosophical clarity.
- Fusion of bhakti (devotion) and jñāna (wisdom).
- Symbolic representations of the Self and ego.
- Allegorical use of dialogue and personification.
- Visual imagery conveying the unity of existence.
- Spiritual messages expressed through nature metaphors.

- Personalised divine figures highlighting immanence.
- Integration of cultural symbols into philosophical ideas.
- Advaitic message of unity through anthropomorphic depictions.
- Anthropomorphism as a bridge between form and formlessness.
- Metaphysical insights presented in relatable forms.
- Use of allegory in devotional poetry.
- Humanised divine figures as pedagogical tools.
- Role of symbolic drama in conveying philosophical teachings.

Objective Questions

1. What is anthropomorphism?
2. Who is depicted as a human-like figure in Kāli Nāṭakam?
3. Which philosophy does Guru's poetry reflect?
4. What literary device attributes human traits to non-human elements?
5. What does the ocean symbolise in Guru's poetry?
6. Which text discusses divine embodiments in Guru's works?
7. What term denotes knowledge dispelling ignorance?
8. Who is addressed as 'O Lord' in Daiva Daśakam?
9. What is the core message of Guru's anthropomorphic depictions?
10. Which poetic device is used to humanise nature?

Answers

1. Personification
2. Kālī
3. Advaita
4. Anthropomorphism
5. Self
6. Kāli Nāṭakam
7. Enlightenment
8. God
9. Unity
10. Personification

Assignments

1. Discuss the significance of anthropomorphism in Guru's devotional poetry.
2. Explain the role of divine embodiments in Kāli Nāṭakam.
3. How does Guru personify nature to convey spiritual ideas?
4. Analyse the philosophical implications of humanised symbols in Guru's poetry.
5. Describe how Guru's use of anthropomorphism bridges form and formlessness.

SGOU

UNIT

The Aesthetics of Devotional Poetry

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- appreciate the poetic aesthetics in Sree Narayana Guru's devotional works.
- identify the use of imagery, metaphor, and symbolism in Guru's devotional poetry.
- analyse the role of musicality and multilingual expression in enhancing devotional appeal.
- understand how Guru's poetry bridges devotional sentiments with philosophical insights.

Prerequisites

Sree Narayana Guru (1856–1928) stands out in modern Kerala as a spiritual poet and social reformer whose works blend profound philosophy with heartfelt devotion. His devotional poetry – exemplified by compositions like Daiva Dasakam (Ten Verses to God) and Atmopadesa Satakam (One Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction) – is revered for its universal spiritual appeal and literary beauty. Written in Malayalam (with some works in Sanskrit and Tamil), these poems are simple in language yet deep in meaning, making lofty spiritual ideals accessible to the common reader. Significantly, Guru's devotional verses are firmly rooted in authentic teachings and avoid sectarian bias, reflecting his famous dictum "One Caste, One Religion, One God for All". This inclusive outlook permeates his poetry, giving it a universalistic devotional aesthetic.

In this unit, we explore the aesthetics of Narayana Guru's devotional poems. We focus on how poetic elegance, imagery and symbolism, metaphor, musicality, and multilingual expression contribute to the unique flavour of his devotional literature. Each section uses examples from authentic works of Sree Narayana Guru – retaining original Malayalam verses to preserve their lyrical quality – and provides analysis in simple English. Throughout, the emphasis is on literary analysis that an undergraduate learner can appreciate, rather than abstract philosophy. Reflective questions and activities are included to encourage engagement with the poems' devotional aesthetics of these poems

Key themes

Devotional Poetry, Imagery, Symbolism, Musicality, Multilingual Expression, Poetic Aesthetics, Sree Narayana Guru

Discussion

3.4.1 Poetic Elegance in Guru's Devotional Verse

Sree Narayana Guru's poetry is celebrated for its poetic elegance – a graceful blending of simplicity and depth. His devotional verses, though expressing profound spiritual truths, are composed in lucid Malayalam, avoiding convoluted language. This stylistic clarity means that even a short prayer can carry layered meanings. For instance, the opening lines of Daiva Dasakam –

ദൈവമേ! കാത്തുകൊൾകങ്ങു
കൈവിടാതിങ്ങു ഞങ്ങളെ;
നാവികൻ നീ ഭവാബ്ധിക്കൊ-
രാവിവൻതോണി നിൻപദം.

Appear straightforward as an appeal to God for protection, yet they condense a whole philosophy of surrender. In translation*: "O God, do guard us here without ever letting go; / You are the helmsman on the ocean of existence and your foot (പദം: term) is the boat to cross it."* In just two lines, the Guru elegantly conveys human vulnerability and divine guidance using the image of a ship's captain. The verse flows naturally in Malayalam, demonstrating how economy of words and clarity of thought produce an elegant devotional appeal.

One hallmark of Guru's poetic style is the use of classical meter and form in a way that feels effortless. Many of his Malayalam poems adopt Sanskritic metres or rhythmic patterns traditionally used in devotional songs, lending a musical cadence to the verses. Guru balances form with accessibility. Daiva Dasakam, for example, consists of ten four-line stanzas that follow a consistent rhythmic structure. The syllables are arranged so that the verses can be easily chanted or sung in unison by devotees, reinforcing their role

as prayer. Despite the metrical discipline, the language remains conversational. This fusion of formal structure with a natural voice is a key aspect of Narayana Guru's poetic elegance. It allows the verses to resonate with lay devotees while still pleasing the literary ear with their craftsmanship.

Guru's devotional poems are also notable for their succinctness. He often expresses a comprehensive idea in a single stanza. Consider Verse 7 of Daiva Dasakam: "നീ സത്യം ജ്ഞാനമാനന്ദം, നീ തന്നെ വർത്തമാനവും / ഭൂതവും ഭാവിയും; വേറെല്ലോതും മൊഴിയും ഓർക്കിൽ നീ." In English: *"You are Existence (Truth), Knowledge, and Bliss. You alone are the present, the past and future; indeed, when we reflect, every spoken word too is You."*. In four short lines, the Guru elegantly summarizes a Vedantic concept of the Divine (Brahman) as the ultimate reality in all times and all speech. The poetic elegance here lies in how naturally the philosophical idea is woven into a devotional address. The verse does not read like a dense theoretical statement; instead, it unfolds as a loving description of God's all-encompassing nature, maintaining a devotional tone. This ability to compress profound ideas into simple poetic lines without losing emotional warmth is a signature of Narayana Guru's style.

Another aspect of elegance is restraint and balance. Guru's devotional poetry avoids excessive ornamentation or hyperbole. The tone is often calm, contemplative, and reverential rather than overtly sentimental. This restrained emotional pitch actually adds to the aesthetic appeal – the poems emanate a sense of peace and equanimity, reflecting the spiritual poise of the poet. For instance, in Atmopadesa Satakam, which is more introspective, the voice remains steady and instructional, yet devotional undercurrents run through it. The first verse invokes the "mysterious embryo" of divine knowledge within oneself with measured reverence. By keeping the emotional tenor gentle and sincere, Guru's verses achieve a classical elegance, inviting readers into a tranquil state of reflection rather than overwhelming them with passion. This makes the devotion expressed feel deeply genuine and dignified – a quiet beauty that characterizes his poetic aesthetics.

3.4.2 Imagery and Symbolism in Devotional Contexts

One of the most striking aesthetic features of Narayana Guru's devotional poetry is his rich use of imagery and symbolism. The Guru frequently employs vivid images from nature and daily life to convey spiritual and devotional ideas. These images make abstract concepts tangible and memorable. By wrapping philosophy in metaphorical language, Guru ensures that the devotional message appeals to the imagination of readers and listeners.

A central image in Daiva Dasakam is that of the ocean and the boat. The very first verse likens the world to a dangerous sea (ഭവാബ്ധി) and God to a navigator and a sturdy boat. This powerful maritime imagery instantly communicates the idea of life's journey and the need for divine guidance. The ocean (symbolising samsara or the ever-changing world) is vast and perilous, while the boat or ship (symbolising God's grace or God's "term") is the means to safety. By visualizing God as a skilled captain steering us across rough waters, the poem evokes a feeling of trust and reassurance in the devotee's heart. The symbolism is accessible to anyone familiar with the sea – an apt choice in Kerala's context – and it beautifully illustrates the devotional

theme of surrender: just as sailors trust their captain and vessel, devotees trust God to carry them through life's storms.

Narayana Guru's use of natural imagery often carries layers of symbolism. In Verse 4 of Daiva Dasakam, he presents a cosmic image:

ആഴിയും തിരയും കാറ്റും-
ആഴവും പോലെ ഞങ്ങളും
മായയും നിൻ മഹിമയും
നീയുമെന്നുള്ളിലാകണം.

Here the sea, waves, wind, and depth of the ocean are symbolic counterparts for different facets of existence – the individual selves ("we"), illusion (maya), God's glory, and God Himself. The Guru suggests that just as ocean, wave, breeze, and depth coexist as one sea, within our being these four – the human, the illusory world, the divine magnificence, and the Supreme – should all become integrated. This is a profound spiritual idea of unity (Advaita) conveyed through a single composite image of the ocean and its movements. The symbolism invites the devotee to internalize the vision of oneness: to see the world's diversity (waves, wind) and the divine (depth) as parts of one grand ocean of reality. Such imagery transforms philosophical unity into a visual and emotive experience.

Light and darkness imagery is also prominent in Guru's poetry, symbolising knowledge and ignorance. In Atmopadesa Satakam, the lamp is a recurring symbol for the inner Self or consciousness. Verse 5 describes the "eternal lamp which witnesses the sleeping and waking" of all beings. This lamp, which never extinguishes, symbolises the divine consciousness that illumines all states of experience. By conducting oneself in the light of this eternal lamp (the Atman or God within), one can navigate life properly. The radiance of the lamp stands for spiritual illumination, and the poet uses it to remind devotees that an unchanging divine light is present within them, guiding them even as they pass through the darkness of ignorance or worldly distractions.

In contrast, darkness often symbolises ignorance. In Verse 18 of Atmopadesa Satakam, Guru emphatically states, "The Self is not darkness. If it were darkness, we would not have known and identified ourselves as 'I'". Here darkness is used symbolically to refute the idea that the Self could be something unknown or inert – it must be light, since it enables knowledge. By personifying darkness and light, Guru gives the reader a clear symbolic vocabulary: light equals awareness of God or Self; darkness equals spiritual unawareness. This use of symbolism has a devotional effect as well – turning to the light within becomes an act of devotion, almost like approaching a divine flame.

Symbolic imagery in Narayana Guru's poems often draws from classical Hindu thought, but in a way that remains devotional and poetic rather than purely philosophical. For example, he refers to God as "ദയാസിന്ധു" (dayā-sindhu, ocean of mercy) and "ചിദാനന്ദ" (chidānanda, consciousness-bliss) in Daiva Dasakam Verse 9. These epithets themselves are symbols – the ocean of mercy evokes an infinite, all-nourishing expanse of compassion, inviting devotees to meditate on God's mercy as something vast and unfathomable. "Chidānanda" (Pure Consciousness and Bliss) is a concept from Vedanta, but by inserting it into a prayer, the Guru turns it into a symbolic name for the Divine, one that a devotee can chant lovingly. In this way, philosophical attributes of God become part of the symbolic s of devotion.

In Dr. Geetha Suraj's study, 'Sreenarayanaguruvinte Sthothrangal Oru Padanam' (ശ്രീനാരായണഗുരുവിന്റെ സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ ഒരു പഠനം - A Study of Sreenarayana Guru's Hymns), many unique aspects of Guru's poetic talent and its aesthetic beauty Have been discussed. Some of the view are included below:

Guru's poetic ability deserves as much commendation as the loftiness of his *darshanam* (ദർശനം - vision/philosophy). Guru has not been adequately evaluated as the creator of poems filled with the golden radiance of versification. His poetic talent is most evident in his *sthothrarachanakal* (സ്തോത്രരചനകൾ - hymn compositions), particularly the hymns of the middle period, which are particularly significant for their *kaavyagunam* (കാവ്യഗുണം - poetic quality).

It has already been mentioned that Guru's early hymns are *Ashtakams* (അഷ്ടകങ്ങൾ - eight-verse hymns) of an imitative nature. Most Ashtakams employ a compositional style that weaves together descriptive words with a single grammatical connection. They are primarily focused on *shabdaalankaarangal* (ശബ്ദാലങ്കാരങ്ങൾ - figures of speech based on sound). The radiance of poetry shines forth in the hymns of the second phase. "Many *stavas* (സ്തവങ്ങൾ - eulogies) in these gleam with *shabdabhangi* (ശബ്ദഭംഗി- beauty of sound) and *arthapushti* (അർത്ഥപുഷ്ടി - richness of meaning)." Dr. Sukumar Azhikode assesses their poetic excellence, stating that "'Shanmukhadasakam' (ഷൺമുഖദശകം) and 'Subrahmanya Kīrthanam' (സുബ്രഹ്മണ്യകീർത്തനം) are such that any poet, a worshipper of words and master of descriptions, would be envious enough to claim them as his own." Kumaran Asan's observation, 'Swami is one of those rare great souls who possesses not only extraordinary genius but also unparalleled grace of Saraswati," would be another important assessment recognising Guru's poetic prowess. If Guru was a poetic philosopher, he was equally a philosophic poet. Guru did not compose his works solely for the sake of pure poetry. He utilised his poetic talent for praises of God, visions, and teachings. Such was the mandate demanded of the era. Had it been otherwise, Guru would have become a first-rate poet in Malayalam, whom no literary historian could have ignored. Guru's primarily second-phase hymns are evidence of this.

3.4.2.1 The Poet Rich in Description

Many of the hymns are *Keshadipada stutis* (കേശാദിപാദസ്തുതികൾ- hymns describing the deity from head to foot). In the second-phase hymns, along with the description of the deity's form, his own spiritual state is also revealed. Guru has been able to describe both of these in a way that strongly imprints on the reader's mind. Guru has mostly employed the descriptive techniques of the classical period.

Nevertheless, the radiance of an ethereal poetic beauty makes these descriptions exceedingly pleasing.

The unmatched charm of description mostly radiates in the Subrahmanya hymns. The *Keshadipadadescriptions* in 'Shanmukhastotram' (ഷൺമുഖ സ്തോത്രം) and 'Shanmukhadasakam' (ഷൺമുഖദശകം) alone are enough to reveal the feast of a poet of perfect merit.

അർക്കബിംബമൊരാറുദിച്ചുയരുന്ന
പോലെവിളങ്ങിടും
ത്യക്കിരീട ജടയ്ക്കിടയ്ക്കരവങ്ങള
മ്പിളിതുമ്പയും
ദുഷ്കൃതങ്ങളകറ്റുവാനൊഴുകീടു
മംബരഗംഗയും
ഹൃത്ക്കുരുന്നിലെനിക്കുകാണണമെ
പ്പൊഴും ഗുഹ! പാഹിമാം.

(Like six suns rising together, shines The tip of the hoods of serpents amidst the matted locks of the sacred crown; To dispel misdeeds flows the celestial Ganga; In the lotus of my heart, may I always behold Guha, protect me!)

How beautifully Guru portrays the six faces of Shanmukha as if six suns were rising. The description of form in 'Shanmukhadasakam' is similarly catching.

തൂമത്തിങ്കൾക്കിടാവും തിരുമുടിയിടയിൽ
പാമ്പെലുമ്പുമ്പരാറും
ശ്രീമച്ചെമ്പൻ മുടിക്കൽ
തിരുവൊളിചിതറി-
ച്ചിന്തുമന്തിച്ചുവപ്പും
നാമപ്പൊട്ടിട്ടിണങ്ങുംനെറുക ചെറുപിറ-
ക്കീറു കാർവില്ലു വെല്ലും-
ന്നോമൽപ്പൂഞ്ചില്ലിവല്ലിക്കൊടിയുമടിയനുൾ-
ക്കൺമുനയ്ക്കെന്നു കാണാം?

(The young moon and the serpent's hood swaying amidst the sacred hair, The divine light scattering and spreading the evening's redness on the beautiful reddish hair, The small crescent moon fitting snugly on the forehead adorned with the sacred mark, and the tender creeper of the delicate eyebrows challenging the dark bow - may I, your humble servant, always behold these with the tip of my eye.)

The description of form in 'Subrahmanya Kīrthanam' (സുബ്രഹ്മണ്യകീർത്തനം) is no different.

അന്തിപ്പൂന്തിങ്കളുന്തിത്തിരുമുടിതിരുകി
ച്ചൂടിയാടും ഫണത്തിൻ
ചന്തം ചിന്തും നിലാവിന്നൊളി
വെളിയിൽ വിയദ്
ഗംഗ പൊങ്ങിക്കവിഞ്ഞും
ചന്തച്ചെന്തീമിഴിച്ചെങ്കതിർനിര ചൊരിയി
ച്ചന്ധകാരാനകറ്റി
ച്ചിന്താസന്താനമേ, നിന്തിരുവടിയടിയൻ-
സങ്കടം പോക്കിടേണം.

(The beauty of the serpent's hood that sways, adorning the sacred hair with the evening's beautiful moon peeking out, the moonlight spreading its charm as the celestial Ganga rises and overflows outside, the rows of beautiful red rays from the beautiful fiery eyes dispelling darkness - O offspring of thought, may your holy feet remove the sorrow of this humble servant.)

Only a blessed poet could perceive the beauty of the crescent moon of the evening peeking out from the sacred hair. The *kaavya bimbangal* (കാവ്യ ബിംബങ്ങൾ - poetic images) that cling to the heart, such as this world spread out like a green lie, the body bound by old age, the mind swirling like a *jyothishchakram* (ജ്യോതിശ്ചക്രം - wheel of light), and the flow of the honey of silence, are abundant in Guru's descriptions.

In the Devi hymns, the goddess is mostly described as *Maya* (മായ - illusion) in the form of knowledge. 'Devistavam' (ദേവീസ്തവം) and 'Mannanthala Devistavam' (മണ്ണന്തല ദേവീസ്തവം) are not *Keshadipadastutis*. In 'Kalinatakam' (കാളിനാടകം), Guru has rendered a very beautiful description of the goddess's form.

അനങ്ഗന്റെ പൂവില്ലിനല്ലൽപ്പെടുത്തും
കുനുച്ചില്ലിവല്ലിക്കൊടിത്തല്ലു തെല്ലി-
ങ്ങനങ്ഗന്നുമങ്ഗത്തിലേറ്റാലൊഴിച്ചൂ...

(The slightest touch of the creeper-like slender eyebrows, which pain even Cupid with his floral arrows, would relieve Cupid's affliction...)

Beginning thus, about twenty-five couplets describe the goddess's form. The vibrant use of words creates the impression of the goddess's form in dancing.

In the Shiva hymns, the *Keshadipada description* of Shiva appears in 'Shivashatakam' (ശിവശതകം). From the seventh to the seventeenth verse, ten verses are dedicated to the Keshadipadadescription. The lips that vie with the *thondi pazham*

(തൊണ്ടിപ്പഴം - scarlet gourd fruit), the teeth like a washed pearl, the cheeks like the full moon - thus, the description extends to the *poochilanka* (പൂച്ചിലങ്ക – floral anklets) at his lotus feet

ഒഴുകിടുമംബരഗങ്ഗതന്റെ നീരിൽ-
ച്ചുഴിയൊടു തുല്യമുദിച്ചെഴുന്ന നാഭി-
ക്കുഴിയിലെഴുന്ന കളിന്ദകന്യ മേലോ-
ട്ടൊഴുകിടുമെന്നകണക്കു രോമരാജി.

(The Ganga flowing from the sky, in whose waters the navel-pit rises like a whirlpool, the line of hair rising from that pit, as if the Yamuna were flowing upwards - this description is delightful.)

3.4.2.2 Description of Women

According to Geetha Suraj, the description of the female form has often served as a prime example of poets' descriptive prowess. It is clear that Sreenarayana Guru was a lover of beauty whose eyes sought out the divine in all the hidden beauties of nature. All the retreats Guru chose - Aruvippuram, Sivagiri, Aluva, and Kunnumpaara - are concrete manifestations of natural beauty.

The beauty of the female body has also influenced Guru's poetic mind. Otherwise, he would not have been able to make the descriptions of *kamineegarhanam* (കാമിനീഗർഹണം - condemnation of women) and *aadinaaval varnanagal* (ആടിനവൾ വർണ്ണനകൾ- descriptions of dancing women) so beautiful. Although both are descriptions of women, they evoke different sentiments. One is *bibhatsam* (ബീഭത്സം - repulsive) and the other *shringaram* (ശൃംഗാരം - erotic). The very fact that Guru could transform the same object into intense experiences of these two *rasas* (രസങ്ങൾ - aesthetic sentiments) is proof of his poetic excellence.

Like nature, woman is a natural temptation. The aim of *kamineegarhanam* is to control the mind by describing that beauty in a way is what evokes disgust and revulsion, thus deterring the mind from that temptation. Sankaracharya and Pattanathu Pillaiyar are among those who have engaged in *kamineegarhanam* in this manner. Pattanathu Pillaiyar's *nindaa* (നിന്ദാ - condemnation) of women is very famous. Guru has technically written this *kamineegarhanam* in 'Shivashatakam'. From the 69th to the 73rd verse, five verses are composed by Guru in a way that (*nindaa* നിന്ദാ)aims to condemn women. Although the intention is the *nindaa* (നിന്ദാ) of the female body, the mesmerising beauty of the female form permeates every word. The sharpness of the corner of the eye, the allure of the navel-pit, and the attractiveness of the breasts standing tall and heavy like a rutting elephant are described in a way that is palpable. Such descriptions of women can also be seen in 'Vairagyadashakam' (വൈരാഗ്യദശകം - Ten Verses on Detachment). Guru describes women as those devoid of virtues, as clinging and embracing demons, and as corpses that devour life by shaking their twin breasts. In the context of the *manipravalam* (മണിപ്രവാളം - a literary style blending Sanskrit and Malayalam) and *venmaniprasthanam* (വെൺമണിപ്രസ്ഥാനം - a school of Malayalam poetry traditions of eroticism), Guru's *nindaa* (നിന്ദാ)of women needs to be evaluated specifically.

When this same woman transforms into Devi and mother, she becomes dear to Guru. The very limbs described as highly repulsive and disgusting become beautiful and bestowers of blessing. Guru prostrates before ['Digambaran Thirumeypakkutha Thingal Ner Mukhiye' (ദിഗംബരൻ തിരുമെയ്പകുത്ത തിങ്കൾ നേർമുഖിയെ] the moon-faced one who shares the form of the Digambara [Lord Shiva]).

In the description of Parvati's breasts

in 'Bhadrakalyashtakam' (ഭദ്രകാള്യഷ്ടകം), the craftsmanship of a true poet itself can be seen in the Guru.

പാടീരാദിസുഗന്ധിചൂചുകതടീം
ശാടീകുടീരസ്തനീം
ഘോടീവൃന്ദസമാ നധാടിയുയുധീം
ശ്രീഭദ്രകാളീം ഭജേ.

(She whose breast tips are fragrant with padeera (a type of fragrant wood) and other substances, whose breasts are like tented dwellings, whose gait rivals the swiftness of a mare, I worship that Sree Bhadrakali.)

The description of the Devi in 'Kalinatakam' is one of the rarest renderings in Malayalam poetry itself. As the words dance and move, the form of the goddess that emerges in the reader's mind is that of awe and a sense of aesthetic beauty.

There are numerous examples in the hymns of Guru's ability and expertise to capture not only concrete forms but also abstract emotions using powerful poetic imagery. The very description of the ethereal bliss of yogic experience in various hymns can be taken as an example. In 'Swanubhavageethi' (സ്വാനുഭവഗീതി - Song of Self-Experience), only a true poet could depict the romantic beauty of the rush of the ocean of bliss rising and flowing spontaneously.

ഒരു കോടി ദിവാകരരൊത്തുയരും
പടി പാരൊടു നീരനലാദികളും
കെടുമാറു കിളർന്നു വരുന്നൊരു നിൻ
വടിവെന്നുമിരുന്നു വിളങ്ങിടണം.

(May your form, which arises shining like a crore sun rising together, along with the earth, water, fire, and other elements, always remain radiant, never to be extinguished.)

Guru has been able to convey the *Brahmanubhavam* (ബ്രഹ്മാനുഭവം - experience of the Brahman or Externity) that arises with the brilliant radiance of a crore suns, through words in the contemplation of the *chithjada* (ചിജ്ജഡ - consciousness and matter).

3.4.3 The Use of Metaphor and Analogy

Closely related to imagery is Narayana Guru's masterful use of metaphor and analogy in his devotional poems. Metaphors allow the Guru to explain subtle spiritual principles by comparing them to familiar objects or situations. These comparisons not only clarify the meaning but also add a poetic charm that engages the reader. Guru's metaphors are often striking and unexpected, which makes the lines memorable and thought-provoking.

A powerful analogy is found in Atmopadesa Satakam Verse 3:

വെളിയിലിരുന്നു വിവർത്തമിങ്ങു കാണും
വെളിമുതലായ വിഭൂതിയഞ്ചുമോർത്താൽ
ജലനിധിതന്നിലുയർന്നിടും തരംഗാ-
വലിയതുപോലെയഭേദമായ് വരേണം.

Guru says all the apparent differences we perceive in the world should be known as substantially one, "like the oneness of waves rising on the ocean". This simile (a type of metaphor using 'like') conveys the Advaitic idea that though waves appear separate, they are all water; similarly, though people and objects appear distinct, all are essentially Brahman (the divine substance). For a devotee reading this, the metaphor gently shifts one's vision: instead of seeing a fragmented world, one is invited to see God everywhere. The aesthetic beauty lies in the simplicity of the comparison – anyone who has seen the sea can appreciate how each wave is part of the ocean. By choosing such a familiar natural process as the basis of the analogy, Guru makes a lofty concept emotionally palatable. The image of myriad waves

rising and falling as one ocean also adds a kind of rhythmic beauty to the verse, echoing the ebb and flow of life. This metaphor not only illustrates unity but also evokes a feeling of awe at the majesty of creation, enhancing devotional sentiment toward the Creator who is immanent in that creation.

Guru also employs metaphor to drive home the folly of ego or narrow thinking. In Verse 10 of Atmopadesa Satakam, he presents a brief parable-like scenario: "If a man sitting in the dark asks another, 'Who are you?' and the other retirms the questions, 'Who are you?', the answer that comes from both will be the same – 'I am'.". This scenario is metaphorical – the dark room represents our ignorance of our true identity, and the identical answer "I am …"symbolises the fundamental unity of selfhood. It's an analogy pointing out that at the deepest level, all souls share the same 'I-ness', the same divine essence, even if they do not realise it. The metaphor functions aesthetically by staging a mysterious little drama that intrigues the reader. It engages us to think: in darkness (of ignorance), two individuals identify only as pure existence (I am…, I am myself), hinting that the distinctions between "you" and "me" are ultimately baseless. Such a metaphor stimulates reflection, a key aim in Guru's didactic poetry, while also providing a succinct experiential image for a complex idea.

Across his works, Narayana Guru's use of metaphor and analogy stands out for being innovative yet unforced. He can be direct, as when saying "The phenomenal world is like a tree", or more allegorical, as in the dark room example. In each case, the comparison illuminates an aspect of spiritual life: the need for God's guidance, the unity of existence, the nature of the self, the unreliability of the senses, and so forth. These metaphors greatly enhance the literary charm of the poems. They invite the reader to decode meanings, which turns reading into an interactive, contemplative experience. For a devotee, every metaphor is also a reminder of God or truth hidden in plain sight – the ocean, the tree, the lamp all become symbols to meditate upon. This way, Guru's metaphors bridge aesthetic pleasure and spiritual practice.

3.4.4 Musicality and Meter: The Sound of Devotion

Devotional poetry is meant not just to be read, but often to be heard and recited. The musicality of Sree Narayana Guru's poems is therefore an important aspect of their aesthetic appeal. Guru paid careful attention to the sound, rhythm, and cadence of his verses, making them pleasing to the ear and easy to chant. This musical quality reinforces their devotional character, as many of these poems are used as prayers or hymns in daily worship.

One clear example of musicality is Daiva Dasakam, which has been set to tune and sung in countless gatherings. The poem's meter is simple and lyrical, with each line flowing into the next, often with an internal rhyme or alliteration that makes it melodious. In Malayalam, Daiva Dasakam is written in a metre that allows each verse to be recited in a single breath, with a gentle pause at the midpoint (indicated by a caesura in written form).

The repetition of sounds (notice നി...നീ, ഭവാ...തോണി, ...ഇങ്ങു ഞങ്ങളേ / ...ന് പദം) and the balanced break in the middle give it a rhythmic swing. When read aloud, the words almost naturally fall into a gentle chant pattern. This careful sound structure makes the prayer catchy and easy to memorise. It is no surprise that Daiva Dasakam has been translated into over a hundred languages and recommended to

be recognised as a universal prayer; its sonorous quality crosses language barriers, resonating with devotees worldwide.

In Atmopadesa Satakam, the tone is more contemplative, but musicality is still present through the use of alliteration and assonance. Guru often strings together words with similar sounds to create a mantra-like effect. For example, Verse 1 in Malayalam:

അറിവിലുമേറിയറിഞ്ഞീടുന്നവൻ തന്നു-
രുവിലുമൊത്തു പുറത്തുമുജ്ജ്വലിക്കും
കരുവിനു കണ്ണുകളഞ്ചുമുള്ളടക്കി
ത്തെരുതെരെ വീണുവണങ്ങിയോതിടേണം

The repetition of "റ" (ra), the rolled or trilled sound and the internal rhythm of short and long syllables give this verse a measured, musical cadence when chanted. Although the content is instructing how to commence the chant (with senses turned inward), the verse itself embodies what it teaches by drawing the listener's senses inward through a melodious pattern. The controlled rhythm and repetition can induce a meditative mood, demonstrating Guru's skill in aligning form (sound) with function (devotion and meditation).

Many of Guru's shorter devotional works, such as various ashtakams (eight-verse hymns) and stotrams (praise hymns), follow classical Sanskrit meters like Anushtup or Sikharini, or native Malayalam song meters. By using these time-honoured rhythmic frameworks, Guru ensured that his verses could be sung to traditional tunes. For instance, the Subrahmanya Ashtakam and Devi Stavam are likely to have composed in meters that match the singing style of kritis or keerthanas. The aesthetic outcome is that the reader can almost hear the music in the lines. Even on the printed page, the symmetry of meter in each stanza is evident to the trained eye, giving a visual hint of the sonic harmony of the poem.

In performance, the musicality becomes fully alive. Devotees often recite Daiva Dasakam collectively, and the experience is one of rhythmic unity, much like singing a bhajan. The rise and fall of the voice as the congregation intones "ജയിക്കുക മഹാദേവ, ദീനാവന പരായണാ…" (jayikkuka mahādeva, dīnāvana parāyaṇā) from Verse 9 creates a powerful sense of devotion. The very sounds "ദീനാവന പരായണാ" (dīnāvana parāyaṇā – refuge of the helpless) have a musical lilt with the elongated 'aaa' endings, suitable for sustained notes in song. The repetition of 'ജയിയ്ക്കുക' (jayikkuka, "victory to [You]" or "may You triumph") in that verse is inherently rhythmic, almost like a drumbeat of victory. Such elements show Narayana Guru's intuitive sense of how sound can amplify devotion – the listener is not only hearing the meaning but feeling the rasa (essence) of devotion through the melody and rhythm.

Activity

Listen to a recording of Daiva Dasakam or recite it aloud with your classmates. Pay attention to the rhythm and sound of the words. How do these elements affect your experience of the poem's meaning? Try clapping to the beat or marking the metrical pattern. This exercise can help you appreciate the musical structure of the poem.

The musicality of Guru's devotional poetry also lies in its ability to induce a spiritual mood (ഭാവം). In Indian aesthetic theory, the bhakti rasa (the sentiment of devotion) can be heightened by musical elements. Guru's choice of soft consonants, open vowel sounds, and flowing meters often contributes to a serene, reverential mood. For example, the absence of harsh consonant clusters in many verses and the presence of sonorous nasal sounds (as in

"ആഴണം, വാഴണം, നിത്യം വാഴണം വാഴണം സുഖം" – "Āzhanam, vāzhanam, nityam vāzhanam sukham" in Verse 10, meaning "may we live, flourish everlastingly in happiness") give a soothing lullaby-like quality to the prayer's conclusion. The phrase itself is musical with its repetition and gentle consonants, evoking the eternal peace it describes. This marriage of sound and sense ensures that the act of recitation itself becomes a kind of musical meditation, enhancing the devotee's emotional connection to the content.

3.4.5 Multilingual Expression and Style

Sree Narayana Guru was a trilingual poet, composing works in Malayalam, Sanskrit, and Tamil. His devotional poetry, while predominantly in Malayalam, is enriched by this multilingual mastery. The multilingual expression in Guru's works refers not only to the fact that he wrote in multiple languages, but also to how elements of different linguistic traditions intermingle in his poetry, contributing to its unique aesthetics. Understanding this aspect provides insight into the breadth of his literary canvas and the inclusive nature of his devotional vision.

Firstly, Guru's proficiency in Sanskrit allowed him to incorporate Sanskrit diction and concepts seamlessly into his Malayalam devotional poems. Malayalam, being highly Sanskritised in literary register, provides a fertile ground for this blend. For example, in Daiva Dasakam, terms like maya (illusion), satyam, jnanam, anandam (Truth, Knowledge, Bliss), and chidānanda appear directly in the Malayalam verses. These lend a certain gravitas and universality to the prayer. A Malayalam reader encounters native tongue woven with Sanskrit philosophical vocabulary, making the poem resonate beyond regional boundaries. The aesthetic effect is a rich linguistic texture – the simplicity of colloquial Malayalam ('ഞങ്ങളെ, (to) us') coexists with the elevated tone of Sanskrit epithets for God. This dual register enables the poem to function on a common devotional level and a scholarly philosophical level simultaneously. It also reflects Narayana Guru's aim to speak to all of humanity: Sanskrit connects him to the pan-Indian spiritual heritage, while Malayalam grounds him in the local cultural milieu.

Guru's Sanskrit compositions themselves, such as Darsanamala (a philosophical garland of verses) or Nirvana Darshanam, exhibit a classical elegance in language. When he chose Sanskrit for a subject, it was often to engage with age-old spiritual discourse in its own language. However, even those works maintain a devotional undercurrent. His Sanskrit ashtakams (like Vasudeva Ashtakam, Subrahmanya Ashtakam, etc.) are direct hymns of praise, similar to traditional Sanskrit stotras. The existence of these works shows Guru's versatility – he could emulate the style of Adi Shankara or other saint-poets when writing in Sanskrit, complete with dense mythological allusions and formal invocations. For instance, in Vasudeva Ashtakam, he praises Lord Krishna (Vasudeva) in refined Sanskrit, invoking various names and attributes of the deity. The aesthetic here is one of classical devotional fervour, appealing to those steeped in Sanskrit liturgy. Guru's ability to operate in that realm and then produce something as plain-spoken as Daiva Dasakam in Malayalam is remarkable. It underscores how his devotional aesthetic transcended linguistic boundaries – he could stir devotion in the scholar with Sanskrit and equally move the villager with Malayalam.

Moreover, Narayana Guru translated between languages, an exercise which itself is aesthetically enlightening. He translated the Tamil classic Thirukkural into Malayalam and parts of the Upaniṣads from Sanskrit to Malayalam. Through translation, he brought the essence of the literature of one language into another, enriching the expressive capacity of Malayalam. This translational skill also meant that when composing original Malayalam verses, Guru was keenly aware of subtle nuances and could pick the precisely right word whether it originated in Sanskrit or the local tongue. In Atmopadesa Satakam, for example, alongside Sanskritic terms, we find earthy Malayalam imagery (like the gun barrel and birds metaphor discussed earlier). The code-switching between vocabularies allows different shades of meaning and flavour – Sanskrit terms often carry connotations from scripture, while pure Malayalam words bring in regional colour and immediacy. The outcome is a multilayered palette of language that enriches the reader's experience.

In addition, Guru composed at least one known work in Tamil – Thevarappathinkangal (Hymns in Tamil). While this is lesser-known compared to his Malayalam writings, it demonstrates his desire to communicate devotion in the language of the people around him (Tamil being spoken in the southern parts of Kerala and Tamil Nadu where he had followers). Writing in Tamil, he would have adopted the Tamil poetic idiom, which has its own ancient bhakti tradition (like the Tevaram hymns, Azhwar songs, etc.). Although we won't go deeply into that text here, it's important to note that by engaging with Tamil, Guru aligns himself with the pan-Indian bhakti movement that spanned different languages and centuries. The aesthetic sensibility in doing so is one of inclusiveness – no single language had a monopoly on truth or beauty for Narayana Guru. Devotion, he seemed to suggest, can be expressed in any tongue, and each tongue adds its music to the symphony of prayer.

From a learner's perspective, the multilingual aspect of Guru's poetry can be appreciated by observing how he uses language as part of the art. Consider the line from Daiva Dasakam, 'ദീനാവന പരായണാ' (dīnavana parāyaṇā). Dīna (helpless or poor) and parāyaṇa (refuge/protector) are Sanskrit-derived words, but they sit comfortably in the Malayalam sentence structure to describe God as the refuge of the helpless. The choice of those words instead of pure Malayalam equivalents adds dignity and a scriptural resonance to the line – it's as if the devotee, in a moment of exaltation, switches to the language of prayer common across India. In contrast, the very next line, 'ദയാസിന്ധോ ജയിക്കുക' (dayāsindho jayikkuka – "O ocean of mercy, be triumphant") mixes dayā sindho (Sanskrit for ocean of mercy) with jayikkuka (a Malayalam verb form for "may [You] triumph"). This interlacing creates a linguistic beauty that is uniquely Kerala's – a meeting of Sanskrit and Dravidian. The aesthetic effect is subtle but profound: it reminds the reader that devotion connects cultures and languages, and Guru's poetry is a space where that connection happens gracefully.

3.4.6 Comparative Aesthetic Contexts

To fully appreciate Narayana Guru's devotional poetry, it is helpful to place it in a broader aesthetic context. Guru wrote at a time (late 19th to early 20th century) when the literary scenario of Kerala was in a transitional stage – moving from the ornate styles of classical poetry to

more modern, accessible forms. He was also deeply conversant with the Bhakti (devotional) literary traditions of India. By comparing his work with both earlier devotional poets and his contemporaries, we can discern what makes his approach unique.

In the context of Malayalam literature, earlier devotional works like Poonthanam's Jnānappana (Song of Wisdom, 17th century) or Thunchath Ezhuthachan's Adhyatma Ramayanam (16th century) were popular among laypeople. Those works, composed in simple Malayalam, conveyed Hindu puranic stories and bhakti sentiments in an easy, musical style (e.g., Jnānappana uses the simple pana meter and colloquial language to sing of Krishna). Narayana Guru's Daiva Dasakam and related short prayers can be seen as continuing this tradition of simple, heartfelt devotion in the mother tongue. Like Poonthanam, Guru speaks in a direct and uncomplicated voice to God (e.g., 'ദൈവമേ!' – 'O God!' is as straightforward as 'കൃഷ്ണാ! ഗുരുവായൂരപ്പാ!' "O Krishna! Lord of Guruvayur" in ancient bhakti songs). However, Guru's content diverges from mythological narrative and leans more on philosophical insight. This is a key aesthetic shift: he infuses the simplicity of folk-devotional style with the depth of Vedantic thought. The result is a hybrid of bhakti and jnana (knowledge), which was somewhat new in Malayalam devotional poetry. The aesthetic challenge of blending devotion and non-dualism was the one Guru met with finesse – he could sing of a personal God in one line and hint at an impersonal absolute in the next, without jarring the reader. This is evident when comparing Verse 3 and Verse 7 of Daiva Dasakam: one is a personal plea for providence (food, clothing, care), and the other shifts to describing God as abstract truth and time eternal. Yet the tone and flow remain unified. Guru's work in this way bridges the devotional fervour of poets like Poonthanam with the analytical depth of scholars, creating a devotional aesthetic that is emotionally satisfying and intellectually stimulating.

Indian Bhakti Tradition

In comparison, within the wider Indian bhakti tradition, one might liken Narayana Guru's approach to that of Adi Shankaracharya or Kabir in certain respects. Adi Shankara (8th century), though primarily known as a philosopher, composed stirring devotional hymns (like Bhaja Govindam, Soundarya Lahari). Shankara's Bhaja Govindam in particular shares an ethos with Guru's poetry: it delivers Advaitic teachings in simple verses that urge the devotee to remember God. Narayana Guru, often called a modern Shankara, mirrored this method in Atmopadesa Satakam, where each verse is almost a teaching aphorism in verse form. However, unlike Shankara's of-chosen Sanskrit-only output, Guru made a point to write in Malayalam for his community. In aesthetic terms, Guru democratized what Shankara did – bringing the sublime to the colloquial. This broadens to the audience the impact of poetry - that of fulfilling a social-reformative role together with the aesthetics and beauty when is inclusive.

Comparison of Guru with North Indian saint-poet Kabir (15th century) will enhance the insight in this regard. Kabir's dohas (couplets) famously blend Hindu and Islamic imagery and attack empty rituals, all while expressing devotion to a formless Divine. Narayana Guru similarly emphasized a formless, all-pervading God beyond caste and creed. He didn't use Islamic imagery, since his context was different, but he consciously avoided sectarian specifics in poems

like Daiva Dasakam. From an aesthetic point of view, Kabir's language was the vernacular Hindi of his day, laced with metaphors of weaving, gardening, etc. Guru's language, Malayalam, plays a similar role – common people's language laced with local imagery (oceans, boats, lamps). Both poets favour short lyric forms (Kabir mostly couplets or pithy songs, Guru with panchakams (5 verses), dashakams (10 verses), etc.). There is an elegant brevity and pointedness in their styles. For example, Guru's Jiva Karunya Panchakam (Five Verses on Compassion for Life) directly admonishes:

എല്ലാവരുമാത്മസഹോദരരെ-
ന്നല്ലേ പറയേണ്ടതിതോർക്കുകിൽ നാം?
കൊല്ലുന്നതുമെങ്ങനെ ജീവികളെ-
ത്തെല്ലും കൃപയറ്റു ഭുജിക്കയതും?

"Since we must say that all are brothers of one spirit, how can we kill living beings and eat without mercy?" This bold moral question in verse echoes Kabir's candid, no-nonsense tone on religious hypocrisy. The aesthetic emphasis is one of moral clarity and rhetorical force, embedded in devotional context (compassion as divine duty). By such comparisons, we see Guru belongs to a lineage of poet-saints who used beautiful, plain words to challenge the existing codes and uplift society.

When we consider Guru's contemporaries in Kerala, like Kumaran Asan (who was actually a disciple of Narayana Guru) and Vallathol Narayana Menon, we notice that Guru's poetry is distinct in its exclusive focus on spiritual themes. Asan's famous poems (e.g., Karuna, Chandalabhikshuki) are literary and social, though he too wrote devotional pieces like Prarthana. Vallathol wrote some devotional verses but he is known more for the nationalistic favour. Guru, however, devoted almost all his writing to spiritual and philosophical subjects, making him stand out as a dedicated devotional-literary figure of his era. His aesthetic concerns were focused to conveying truth and devotion, unmarred by experiments in romanticism or realism that preoccupied many of his contemporaries. This purity of purpose gives his poetry a timeless quality – it doesn't feel "dated" in style to the reader as it was never chasing the contemporary literary fashions. This observation testifies why, his works are still sung and studied over a century later as fresh sources of inspiration.

Finally, one should note the social aesthetic context of Guru's devotional poetry. By crafting a universal prayer like Daiva Dasakam and advocating the ideal "One Caste, One Religion, One God for humankind", Narayana Guru imbued his poetry with the aesthetics of unity and compassion. His verses were not only personal expressions to a deity, but were intentionally composed for communities to recite together, cutting across caste lines. In an age when lower castes were often denied access to temples and Sanskrit chants, Guru's Malayalam prayers became a powerful equalizer. The aesthetic choice to keep the Divine address generic yet intimate was deliberate. It allows people of various faiths to adapt the prayer. This broad-minded aesthetic approach connects to the idea of sarvadharma samabhava (equal respect for all religions). For instance, Guru's Anukampā Daśakam (Ten Verses of Compassion) praises figures like Krishna, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad (indirectly by extolling compassion in all traditions), which is akin to a comparative devotional literature in itself. By weaving multiple religious references, he created an aesthetically pluralistic form of devotion that was unusual for its time.

In conclusion, when we compare Narayana Guru's devotional poetry to other contexts – be it earlier Malayalam bhakti poets, pan-Indian saint-poets, or

his contemporaries – we find a unique synthesis of simplicity, depth, and universality. His aesthetic is one that respects tradition (through classical imagery, meter, and concepts) but is unafraid to practice innovations (through language choice, inclusivity, and mingling of bhakti with jnana). It is a genere of literature that arises from a specific cultural moment (Kerala's social reform movement) yet addresses the perennial human spiritual aspirations.

Recap

- Poetic elegance as a hallmark of Guru's devotional verses.
- Role of simple and rhythmic language in devotional appeal.
- Significance of metaphor in conveying spiritual insights.
- Imagery drawn from nature to illustrate philosophical concepts.
- Use of symbolism to depict the unity of existence.
- Multilingual expression enriching the devotional aesthetics.
- Musicality enhancing the prayer-like quality of poems.
- Inclusive language bridging social and cultural divides.
- Integration of Advaita philosophy in devotional poetry.
- The ocean and boat metaphor symbolising life's journey.
- Humanisation of divine attributes for accessibility.
- Rhythmic verses designed for collective chanting.
- Restraint and balance in expressing devotional sentiments.
- Personification of nature as a spiritual metaphor.
- Comparative aesthetics linking Guru's poetry with Indian bhakti tradition.
- Musicality inducing a meditative mood during recitation.
- Imagery of light and darkness symbolising knowledge and ignorance.
- Use of local and classical elements to enhance universality.

- The metaphor of waves representing unity amidst diversity.
- Personal and collective dimensions of devotion in poetry.
- Linguistic fusion between Sanskrit and Malayalam.
- Aesthetic simplicity reflecting profound philosophical insights.
- Metaphors making complex ideas accessible to common readers.
- Social relevance of devotional hymns fostering community spirit.
- Musical structure reinforcing the devotional message.

Objective Questions

1. What is the key feature of Guru's devotional poetry?
2. Which poetic device involves attributing human qualities to non-human entities?
3. What does the metaphor of the ocean represent in Guru's poetry?
4. Which poetic element enhances the rhythmic quality of Guru's verses?
5. What language does Guru predominantly use in his devotional poems?
6. Which text is known for its devotional and philosophical blend?
7. What does the lamp symbolise in Guru's devotional poetry?
8. What does the wave symbolise in Guru's poems?
9. Which aesthetic element makes Guru's poems suitable for chanting?
10. What is the central theme of Guru's devotional poetry?

Answers

1. Simplicity
2. Anthropomorphism
3. Unity
4. Musicality
5. Malayalam
6. Atmopadesa Satakam
7. Knowledge
8. Diversity
9. Rhythm
10. Spiritual Unity

Assignments

1. Discuss the aesthetic features of Sree Narayana Guru's devotional poetry.
2. Analyse the use of metaphor and symbolism in conveying philosophical ideas.
3. Explain how musicality enhances the devotional appeal of Guru's poetry.
4. How does Guru's multilingual expression enrich his devotional works?
5. What makes Guru's devotional poetry distinct within the Indian Bhakti tradition?

SGOU

Guru as a Mystic Poet

SGOU

Mysticism and Poetry

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- define mysticism and distinguish it from organized religious practice
- explain how poetic language conveys transcendent experiences
- analyse key metaphors used by Sree Narayana Guru in his mystical verse
- evaluate the social and ethical dimensions of mystical poetry

Prerequisites

To fully appreciate the mysticism and poetry of Sree Narayana Guru, it's helpful to understand a few core concepts. Mysticism is a profound, direct engagement with the ultimate reality or divine, going beyond intellectual reasoning and ordinary senses. It's an inner journey of transformation, moving from the superficiality of external appearances to the depths of pure consciousness. This state is often described as blissful silence and an all-encompassing unity. This spiritual quest isn't about external rituals but a personal, experiential connection with the Absolute, a shared thread among mystics across various traditions, pointing to a universal truth beyond sectarian distinctions.

In the Indian tradition, this mystical impulse is richly expressed in poetry, from the Upaniṣads to the Bhakti movements. Mystic poets like Sree Narayana Guru uniquely blend profound Advaita Vedanta insights—the philosophy that posits all

beings as expressions of the same ultimate reality (Brahman)—with a deep sense of social responsibility. Their poetry acts as both a 'veil and a revelation,' using symbols, paradoxes, and evocative language to hint at experiences that defy ordinary words. For Guru, his poetic output wasn't just intellectual; it was a spontaneous outpouring of realised truth, born from intense spiritual practice and intuition, aligning him with the legacy of the Rishis whose visions became sublime poetic metaphors.

Sree Narayana Guru's 'Atmopadesa Satakam' is a prime example of such mystical poetry, directly addressing the path to liberation through Self-realisation. His work emphasizes that the ultimate reality, Brahman, isn't a distant deity but the divine presence dwelling within oneself—the Atman. Guru's mystical vision, rooted in Advaita, is deeply experiential and ethical, where true liberation is realised as ananda (bliss) derived from the profound unity of the individual self with pure consciousness(Param Atma/Brahman) pervades all existence. By pointing inward to a reality beyond name and form, 'Atmopadesa Satakam' guides the seeker to transcend the ego, Maya (illusion), and Avidya (ignorance), ultimately leading to the realisation of the non-dual Self and a vision of universal oneness, as encapsulated in his famous dictum: 'One caste, one religion, one God for humankind.'

Key themes

Transcendence, Advaita, Maya (illusion), Ananda (bliss), Metaphor, Self-inquiry, Unity

Discussion

Mysticism refers to a deep, inner experience of the divine or the ultimate reality, often beyond the reach of the logical mind or senses. It is a form of spiritual understanding where the person feels a direct connection or unity with God, the Absolute, or the universal spirit. Mysticism is not just about religious belief—it is about a personal, inner experience that cannot always be explained in words. Unlike organised religious practices, which may focus on rituals, traditions, or doctrines, mysticism focuses on the inner transformation of the soul. It is a journey from the outer world of appearances to the inner world of truth and consciousness. Mystics often speak of losing their individual identity and merging with the infinite or the eternal. This experience is often described as blissful, silent, and deeply peaceful.

Mysticism is found in almost all religious traditions—Christianity, Islam (especially Sufism), Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Though their expressions may differ, mystics across cultures often describe similar experiences—such as inner light, divine love, silence, detachment from the ego, and unity with all beings.

4.1.1 Understanding Mysticism and Its Poetic Expression

Mysticism in literature refers to the articulation of transcendent truths, experiences beyond the senses, and direct communion with the divine. For mystic poets, language becomes both a veil and a revelation — a tool to express what lies beyond ordinary perception. In Indian literary traditions, mystic poetry has always enjoyed a rich lineage, drawing from the Upaniṣads, Bhakti poetry, Buddhist texts, and Vedantic literature. In this tradition, Sree Narayana Guru emerges as a unique voice — one who merges mysticism with ethics, poetic form with philosophical essence, and spiritual detachment with societal concern.

In the Indian context, mysticism is closely connected to the teachings of the Upaniṣads, Vedanta, Bhakti movements, and Yoga philosophy. Mystics like Kabir, Meerabai, Ramana Maharshi, Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, and Sree Narayana Guru expressed their mystical experiences through poetry, silence, service, or non-dualistic (Advaita) thought. For Indian mystics, God or Brahman is not seen as a person far away, but as the divine presence within oneself. The goal of human life, according to mystical thought, is to go beyond the ego, illusion (Maya), and ignorance (Avidya), and realise the Self (Atman)—which is not different from the universal reality (Brahman/Param Atman).

Sree Narayana Guru did not write for literary accolades. The truth he had realised through *tapasya* and spiritual intuition. The Guru's poetic output was not an intellectual exercise, but the spontaneous effusion of a visionary — one who had *seen* the truth and sought to convey it with precision, beauty, and transformative power. He joins the legacy of Rishis — poets of the Vedas and Upaniṣads — whose insights into the universe crystallised into sublime poetic metaphors.

As quoted from *Kavyakautukam* by Bhattatouta:

"He who is not a sage is not a poet. It is the power of vision that makes a person a rishi. One is known as a poet because of his devotion to vision and description. Vision is clarity on the principle of expressions and virtues."

Narayana Guru's mystical vision stems primarily from Advaita Vedanta, the philosophical view that sees all beings as expressions of the same ultimate reality (*Brahman*). But his mysticism is not an abstract metaphysics; it is deeply experiential, ethical, and poetic. His poetry offers *vision as ananda* — bliss derived from the unity of self with all of existence.

Sree Narayana Guru was a mystic in the truest sense. His poems and teachings express a deep inner realisation of the divine. For him, religion was not about outer labels or rituals but about inner purity, truth, and self-realisation. His famous saying, "One caste, one religion, one God for humankind", reflects the mystic's vision of unity—where all external differences dissolve in the light of spiritual truth.

In many of his devotional poems, Guru uses mystical language to speak about silence, oneness, inner light, and the experience of merging with the Supreme. For instance, in his poem Atmopadesa Śatakam, he writes of the Self as the true Guru, pointing inward to a reality that is beyond name and form. The language is symbolic and often abstract—typical of mystic poetry, where the attempt is to express what cannot be fully captured in words.

The Atmopadesa Śatakam is the definitive mystical work of Narayana Guru. In a hundred verses, it charts a deeply introspective path toward spiritual self-realisation. It begins with the exhortation to seek the inner 'karu' (core), the unchanging essence within all beings. Mystical experience, particularly within the framework of liberation, represents a profound direct communion with the absolute, transcending the conventional boundaries of rational thought and sensory perception. In the very first verse, Guru writes:

അറിവിലുമേറിയറിഞ്ഞീടുന്നവൻ ത-
ന്നുരുവിലുമൊത്തു പുറത്തുമുജ്ജ്വലിക്കും
കരുവിനു കണ്ണുകളഞ്ചുമുള്ളടക്കി
ത്തെരുതെരെ വീണുവണങ്ങിയോതിടേണം

Rising even above knowledge, what
within the form
Of the one who knows, as equally
without, radiant shines,
To that Core, with the eyes five
restrained within,
Again and again prostrating in
adoration, one should chant.

(Verse 1, Atmopadesa Śatakam*)*

Sree Narayana Guru's 'Atmopadesha Satakam' offers a profound entry into the realm of mysticism, where the divine is directly experienced beyond rational thought. The very first verse, "Rising even above knowledge...", highlights a "knowledge beyond knowledge"—an intuitive realisation that transcends mere intellectual understanding. This primal 'Core' (karu), radiant within and without, symbolises the ultimate truth, reminding us that true liberation lies in apprehending a reality beyond mental categories and dualistic thought. Guru's poetic simplicity in Malayalam belies a deep Vedantic insight, guiding the seeker towards an inner communion with the Absolute, emphasizing a blissful unity with all existence rather than external rituals.

The poem intricately details the mystical journey, starting with the nature of ordinary knowledge. According to Vedantic doctrine, our mind, through the senses, forms mental modifications (vritti) that reflect supreme consciousness (paramātma chaitanyam), creating worldly perception. However, this knowledge is transient. Guru's poetry beautifully articulates that the Supreme Self (Paramatma), the immutable "radiant Core" (ujjwailkkum karu), constantly shines within both this ephemeral knowledge and the individual possessing it. The path to this realisation, as poetically conveyed, necessitates a deliberate withdrawal of the senses. The seeker must restrain the five senses, turning them inward to focus on the Paramatma, thereby escaping the pervasive delusion of Maya, which is powerfully described as a seductive adversary.

The climax of this mystical path, vividly expressed through Guru's verses, leads to liberation. The true philosopher or knower (jnani) comprehends the underlying unity of existence, realising all phenomena as expressions of a single, undivided consciousness (shuddhādya khaṇḍachaitanyam). This unitive understanding contrasts sharply with dualistic perception. The poem reveals that all perceptions of existence, whether 'being' or 'non-being,' arise from consciousness, asserting it as the sole reality. This culminates in the realisation of identity with Brahman, aligning with the Shruti: 'Brahmaveda brahmaiva bhavati' (The knower of Brahman becomes Brahman). Guru's poetry thus serves not merely as literary art, but as a direct guide to merging into the undifferentiated reality of Brahman, a profound mystical experience.

In verse 2, Guru says:

കരുണവുമിന്ദ്രിയവും കളേബരം തൊ-
ട്ടറിയുമനേക ജഗത്തുമോർക്കിലെല്ലാം

പരവെളിതന്നിലുയർന്ന ഭാനുമാൻ തൻ
തിരുവുരുവാണു, തിരഞ്ഞു തേറിടേണം.

The inner organ, the senses, and counting from the body
The many worlds we know, are all, on thought, the sacred form
Of the supreme Sun risen in the void beyond;
By relentless cogitation one should attain to this.

Sree Narayana Guru's 'Atmopadesha Satakam' offers a profound exploration into mysticism, where reality is directly experienced beyond intellectual constructs. Verse 2, "The inner organ, the senses, and counting from the body...", powerfully illustrates the Advaitic principle that all existence is fundamentally consciousness (Chaitanya). The Guru poetically reveals that everything—from our inner faculties and senses to the vast external worlds—are but manifestations of a single, radiant consciousness, akin to a 'supreme Sun' (Bhanuman) rising in the void. This verse isn't just a philosophical statement; it's a call to action, prescribing "relentless cogitation" to pierce the veil of apparent multiplicity and realise the inherent oneness of all existence, moving from intellectual understanding to direct, unitive vision.

The mystical journey elaborated in the poem begins by dissecting perceived reality, distinguishing between our inner organ (intellect, mind, ego) and external senses, leading to the understanding of our body and the multitude of worlds. Through profound contemplation, these are revealed not as separate entities but as the divine form of the 'supreme Sun risen in the void beyond.' This 'supreme Sun' signifies ultimate consciousness (Chidākāsham),

ചിദാകാശം :- ശുദ്ധബ്രഹ്മം.

Chidakesa is the ultimate consciousness but (ചിത - അറിയുക) Chitakesa means the field of awareness felt during deep meditation often visualised behind closed eyes, particularly between the browse, an all-pervading, luminous principle. The 'void beyond' (paraveli) alludes to the supreme space or the Heart-Cave, the ultimate abode of the Satchidananda Brahman. The imperative to "attain to this by relentless cogitation" underscores that this profound understanding is an active, dedicated, introspective inquiry, mirroring the Upaniṣadic call to "seek and know."

The apparent diversity of the universe, with its countless objects, is ultimately unified within this supreme consciousness. Guru's philosophy, expressed through his poetry, asserts an inductive approach where the inner organ and the supreme Sun represent two poles of reality, unifying all seemingly disparate elements along a vertical axis of graded value-systems. This contemplative method demands a rigorous intellectual effort, akin to *tapas*, or "burning oneself up." It requires detachment from the empirical world and its distractions, as genuine contemplative attention to the Self—the neutral Absolute—cannot be swayed by external passions. This internal discipline, often misunderstood as escapism, is a profound engagement with life's vertical values, requiring the seeker to "restrain the five eyes" (senses) by directing afferent impulses inwards, ceasing the normal outward flow of thought to access the deepest levels of consciousness and attain liberation.

Mystic Experience in Liberation: Mastering the Chariot of Being

In another verse, he compares the senses and ego to horses driven by the charioteer (intellect), echoing the Katho Upaniṣad. But he challenges the reader to look beyond the senses:

ശ്രുതിമുതലാം തുരഗം തൊടുത്തൊരാത്മ-
പ്രതിമയെഴും കരണപ്രവീണനാളും
രതിരഥമേറിയഹന്ത രമ്യരൂപം
പ്രതി പുറമേ പെരുമാറിടുന്നജസ്രം.

With hearing and such as horses linked, carrying within
The Self-image, and ruled over by the master of thinking powers
Such is the libido chariot, mounted whereon the 'I' sense Unceasing deals outward with each form of beauty as it proceeds.

Sree Narayana Guru's 'Atmopadesha Satakam' provides deep insights into mysticism and the path to liberation, often using vivid poetic metaphors. Verse 69, "With hearing and such as horses linked...", draws from the ancient Kathopanishad, depicting the senses as wild horses, the intellect as the charioteer, and the 'I'-sense as the rider on the chariot of desire (ratiratham). This powerful imagery challenges the seeker to look beyond fleeting external engagements to discover the enduring, pure Self. The poem emphasizes a central theme of detachment from illusion and identification with the unchanging Self, a core Advaitic truth reinforced throughout the Shatakam using natural metaphors like the sea and wave, or the snake and rope.

The verse meticulously details the intricate relationship between the Self, senses, intellect, mind, and the body. The five senses of knowledge—hearing, touch, sight, taste, and smell—are poetically likened to horses tethered to a chariot, with the intellect (buddhi) as the adept charioteer. Mounted on this chariot is the 'I'-sense (ahanta), the ego, which ceaselessly moves outwards, pursuing beautiful forms and objects of pleasure. This imagery powerfully illustrates how human beings, driven by sensory desires and egoic identification, remain caught in the endless cycle of worldly engagement. The Guru's poetic vision highlights the predicament of being enslaved by sensory gratification, setting the stage for the profound call to inner discipline and control.

The philosophical essence of this verse lies in recognizing the perfect aloofness and neutrality of the pure thinking substance—the Self-image (atma-pratima)—which corresponds to the highest Absolute Self. While the 'libido chariot' represents the negative aspect of the Self's worldly participation, its linkage to the discerning intellect symbolises the positive aspect, maintaining spiritual purity through this intricate balance. Ultimately, Guru's poetry reveals that true liberation isn't about extinguishing experience but about recognizing the unchanging, witness, consciousness at the heart of all activity. This consciousness remains unblemished by the transient dance of the senses and ego, allowing the seeker to merge with the ultimate reality, unmoving and unaffected by the perceived world.

4.1.3 Language, Symbolism and Metaphor in Mystic Poetry

Mystic poetry, particularly that of Sree Narayana Guru in his 'Atmopadesha Satakam', masterfully employs language, symbolism, and metaphor to convey experiences that transcend ordinary understanding. The verse, "A long-drawn-out dream is this...", uses the powerful metaphor of life as a "protracted dream," highlighting the ephemeral nature of perceived reality. This core Advaitic insight is immediately accessible through the relatable imagery of daily sleep and waking dreams. Furthermore, the "sun" is not merely a celestial body but a profound symbol for *jnana* (spiritual knowledge), the radiant light that dispels *avidya* (ignorance). This symbolic dual perception

of light—both external and, crucially, within—reflects the Advaitic truth that the Self and the cosmos are intrinsically unified, part of one radiant reality, made tangible through poetic expression.

The poem extends this central metaphor by asserting a crucial parity between waking (*jagrat*) and dream (*swapna*) states, both being subject to daily extinction. Guru's language here is precise, describing this continuous, illusory existence as a "long-drawn-out dream that belongs to Maya." This concept of Maya, the cosmic illusion, is not just a philosophical term but is rendered vivid through its connection to the cycles of human experience, constantly lulling individuals into mistaking the unreal for the real. The symbol of "pure aloneness" (*kevala*)—a term loaded with mystical meaning akin to Nirvana or Moksha—is juxtaposed with this dream-like existence, creating a powerful paradox. The language of the poem thus serves to both reveal the transient nature of perceived reality and point towards the singular, enduring Absolute, guiding the seeker through the complex layers of illusion.

Ultimately, Guru's use of metaphorical language aims to liberate the seeker from attachment to the universe's transient forms. By presenting the entire phenomenal world as a "perpetual dream," the poem encourages recognizing the equal impermanence of both waking and dream states. The "pure aloneness" (*kevala*) emerges as the ultimate symbol of unchanging reality, allowing the contemplative mind to transcend limitations. The mystical experience culminates in perceiving that all 'coming and going' is merely the manifestation of this Absolute. The poetry's function of poetry is to provide the seeker with the conceptual tools and the intuitive insights, through its rich imagery and precise diction, to step out of the endless cycle of delusion and suffering, thereby realising true liberation through the understanding of universal oneness.

4.1.4 Atmopadesa Śatakam as a Text of Mystical Transformation

The Atmopadesa Śatakam (One Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction) stands as Sree Narayana Guru's greatest contribution to mystical literature. It is not merely a poetic text but a spiritual manual — a scripture of inner transformation. Written in lyrical Malayalam and accessible yet profound in tone, this work uses the mystical language of Advaita Vedanta to guide the reader through stages of self-inquiry, awareness, detachment, and the bliss of unity.

The core structure of the *Shatakam* can be read as a progression — from perception of duality to the realisation of unity, from bondage in ignorance to freedom in self-knowledge. Guru structures his mystical teachings thematically, guiding the reader on an inward journey.

Unitive vision of reality

വെളിയിലിരുന്നു വിവർത്തമിങ്ങു കാണും
വെളിമുതലായ വിഭൂതിയഞ്ചുമോർത്താൽ
ജലനിധിതന്നിലുയർന്നിടും തരംഗാ-
വലിയതുപോലെയഭേദമായ് വരേണം.

These phenomenal aspects five such as the sky
Which as emergent from outside is here seen to be,
By contemplation one should bring to non-difference
As the sea is to the waves that rise in rows thereon.

Sree Narayana Guru's mystic poetry, exemplified by this verse from 'Atmopadesha Satakam', guides the seeker

towards a direct, unitive vision of reality—a hallmark of mysticism. The verse, "These phenomenal aspects five such as the sky...", intricately links the external cosmos (the five elements: sky, air, fire, water, earth) to the Supreme Self (Brahman). This reflects the Advaitic principle of *Vivarta* (apparent modification), where the perceived universe is not fundamentally separate from Brahman, much like a rope merely appears as a snake due to ignorance. This mystical insight encourages a contemplative shift from perceiving a fragmented world to realising its inherent oneness with the divine, a core tenet of experiential spiritual realisation.

The verse uses the powerful metaphor of the ocean and its waves to illustrate this non-dual reality. Just as waves are not separate from the ocean but are its manifestations, the universe, with its myriad forms, is fundamentally Brahman itself. This is a profound mystical realisation: to see the entire phenomenal world as a divine manifestation (*Vibhūti*), rather than a separate, independent reality. This contemplation, or "relentless cogitation" mentioned elsewhere, is the path to transcend *Prātibhāsika Sattā* (apparent reality) and *Vyavahārika Sattā* (transactional reality) to grasp *Pāramārthika Sattā* (absolute reality)—a direct, intuitive understanding that the "apparent world and Brahman are one and the same."

The mystical element is further deepened by Guru's subtle use of the word 'veli' (space), which signifies both elemental space and the Supreme Self (Brahman). This linguistic duality within the poem itself subtly mirrors the non-dual truth it conveys. The ultimate goal of this contemplative process is to sublate (negate the apparent reality of) the superimposed universe, dissolving the illusion of separation. This is not merely an intellectual exercise, but a transformative journey of inner experience that culminates in the non-dual awareness: "Sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma" (All this is indeed Brahman). The poetry, therefore, serves as a direct guide for the seeker to experience this profound oneness, moving beyond intellectual constructs to a living realisation of the divine presence within and without.

Mind, Metaphor, and Liberation in Sree Narayana Guru's Mystical Poetry

Mystical awakening requires the dropping of identification with body and mind. Guru's verses gently lead the reader toward detachment and equanimity:

മനമലർ കൊയ്തു മഹേശപൂജ ചെയ്യും
മനുജനുമറ്റൊരു വേല ചെയ്തിടേ;
വനമലർ കൊയ്തുമതല്ലയായ്കിൽ മായാ-
മനുവുരുവിട്ടുമിരിക്കിൽ മായമാറും.

The mind-blossom plucking, who offers to the Great Master,
No need has he, other works to perform;
Else, let him pluck blossom wild, and if none is there,
The Maya spell let him repeat; the Maya goes. (Verse 29)

Sree Narayana Guru's 'Atmopadesha Satakam' provides a profound exposition on mystical awakening through its evocative poetry, fundamentally guiding the seeker towards a state of detachment and equanimity. Verse 29, "The mind-blossom plucking, who offers to the Great Master...", brilliantly encapsulates this process. It highlights the paramount importance of mind control (manoniyantrana) as the origin of all sensory activity and desires, asserting that its subjugation leads to inner transformation. The verse poetically equates the ultimate goal of amaneebhava (the state of being beyond mind) with liberation, outlining a progressive path that culminates in the dissolution of Maya

(illusion) and the realisation of the Self's true, unblemished nature.

The core teaching of this verse revolves around the powerful metaphor of offering the 'mind-blossom' (manamalar) to the Great Master (Maheshwara), symbolising supreme consciousness. The mind, as the seat of desires and false notions, must be detached from its worldly engagements and dissolved into the divine. The poetry suggests that a person who constantly offers their liberated mind to the Divine has no need for other spiritual practices to attain Turiya (the fourth state of consciousness). This profound surrender, a key mystical act, allows the individual to transcend their distinct identity and merge with Brahman, leading to the direct experience of 'I am Brahman.' Consequently, the Maya that veiled the Self's true nature poetically dissipates, revealing the inherent self-luminous reality.

For those yet to achieve such profound mental mastery, Guru's poetry offers accessible alternative mystical disciplines, still leading to the same goal. The suggestion to "pluck blossom wild" (vanamalar koytu) symbolises engagement in external acts of worship, such as offering flowers from nature, allowing devotional practices to foster spiritual purity even amidst worldly life. If this is not feasible, the Guru advises repeating the 'Maya spell' (maya manu), a metaphor for a mantra or divine name capable of conquering illusion. These practices, though external, are framed as steps towards inner purification, gradually eradicating avidya (ignorance). The verse, through its rich symbolism of mental blossoming and varied offerings, articulates a progressive journey of self-discipline, where mental impediments are sublimated, leading to the serene state of pure awareness, free from ego and the ceaseless rotation of Maya.

The Inner Light and Supreme Bliss

Even when knowledge to egoism is
subject in any predication,
And one is unmindful of the ultimate
verity of what is said,
Yet as with the truth, however
ultimate, such knowledge
Can never fall outside the scope of the
knowing self.

The verse addresses the profound relationship between Ignorance and the Persistence of Being within the Advaitic framework. Guru Devan clarifies that while ignorance (avidya) creates the illusion of a diverse universe, it fundamentally cannot completely obscure the true nature of reality (Satyaswaroopa). This is because 'Astitā' (being or existence) is none other than Brahman itself. The text states that 'unreality' (anyatam), despite its pervasive influence, can never fully hide the state of 'is, is' (existence). Just as darkness, being non-existent in its essence, cannot utterly extinguish light, so too, ignorance cannot entirely conceal the luminous essence of Knowledge (Sat). This highlights that all perceived phenomena, including the body, are always experienced as having 'being' or 'existence', which is a direct reflection of the underlying Brahman-nature, a solidified presence that ignorance can never entirely mask.

The Pervasive Nature of Being: All Effects as 'Sadghana'

The passage explains that the entire universe is enveloped by 'being', meaning that 'being' permeates everything, expressed as 'Sat asti' (being exists). Consequently, all effects, such as the body and other visible objects (kalēbarādigāryam), are considered 'Sadghana' (solidified being). They are not independent realities but 'vivartas' (transformations without actual change)

of knowledge or Brahman. Just as a rope appearing as a serpent is a vivarta of the rope, the universe is a vivarta of Brahman. The existence perceived in the universe, therefore, belongs to the underlying Brahman, not to the illusory forms. This points to a crucial aspect of discrimination: recognising that while forms created by ignorance (Maya) appear real, their fundamental 'being' is derived solely from Brahman. Those under the sway of illusion chase these apparent realities, while truth-seers discover the pure consciousness that is the true, pervasive Being.

Ignorance's Powers and the Unobscured Existential Aspect of Brahman

Ignorance (avidya) operates through two powers: concealment (āvaraṇa) and projection (vikṣepa). While the concealing power might obscure the conscious (citamsha) and blissful (anandamsha) aspects of Brahman, it is crucially incapable of completely hiding its existential aspect (sadamsha). This is why Guru Devan asserts that all effects, including the body, are 'Sadghana', solidified being. The Upaniṣadic saying, 'Sanmūlāḥ saumya imāḥ sarvāḥ prajāḥ sadāyatanaḥ sat pratiṣṭhāḥ' (Chh. 6.8.4), further corroborates this by stating that all beings have their roots in Being, abide in Being, and are established in Being. This emphasises that despite the illusions projected by ignorance, the fundamental 'existence' of all phenomena ultimately points back to Brahman as their root cause, sustenance, and support. The methodology here involves discerning that the persistent experience of 'being' in all perceived objects is a subtle but undeniable indicator of the underlying, unobscured reality of Brahman.

Diverse Paths to the Unitive Truth: Bridging Personal and Impersonal

The larger philosophical context provided reiterates that Truth is one, unitive, and not a third factor independent of the knower or the known. Each individual's truth emerges from an equilibrium between the Self and the non-Self, existing on a vertical scale of values. This understanding is critical for discriminating true Knowledge from limited perspectives. An ultimate truth, even if intellectually complex, must remain within one's intellectual or emotional reach to have value. This allows for diverse approaches to truth, where an ordinary devotee's personal God can hold equal merit to a philosopher's scientific Absolute. As the Bhagavad Gita states, 'Whatever be the manner in which a person might approach me, even accordingly do I accept him.' This 'law of reciprocal or ambivalent values' settles theological debates like grace versus works, asserting that faith and works must go hand in hand. The example of Kannappa Nayanar underscores that sincere faith, regardless of intellectual sophistication, can lead to the same spiritual merit. Thus, for the 'Discrimination of Seer from the Seen,' this broader view affirms that while the ultimate Being (the Seer) remains obscured by ignorance's projections of ignorance, its pervasive 'existence' is always subtly perceivable, allowing varied personal experiences (the Seen) to serve as valid, though perhaps less direct, paths to realising the same unitive truth.

4.1.5 Darshanamala and the Structure of Mystical Realisation

While Atmopadesa Śatakam presents a lyrical and intuitive journey toward spiritual realisation, Sree Narayana Guru's

Darshanamala serves as a more structured exposition of the mystical path. Composed in Sanskrit, *Darshanamala* (Garland of Visions) contains ten chapters (darsanas), each with ten verses, creating a systematic guide through various philosophical perspectives, culminating in the vision of liberation. Though deeply philosophical, this work is mystical in essence, charting the stages by which a seeker transcends ignorance and awakens to the unity of all existence.

Guru himself explained the purpose of this work as "setting forth the essential philosophy of Vedanta in a succinct manner." Each chapter leads the seeker progressively inward, from the world of appearances to the pure experience of non-duality. The poetic elegance of the Sanskrit verses adds a meditative rhythm to the unfolding mystical argument.

Structure and Thematic Flow of Darshanamala

The ten darsanas in *Darshanamala* are:

1. **Adhyaropa Darsanam** – Vision of Superimposition
2. **Apavada Darsanam** – Vision of Negation
3. **Advaitha Darsanam** – Vision of Non-duality
4. **Bhakti Darsanam** – Vision of Devotion
5. **Yoga Darsanam** – Vision of Yoga
6. **Jnana Darsanam**–Vision of Wisdom
7. **Nirvana Darsanam**–Vision of Liberation
8. **Maya Darsanam**–Vision of Illusion
9. **Karma Darsanam**–Vision of Action
10. **Jnana-Karma-Samuchchaya Darsanam** – Vision of the Synthesis of Knowledge and Action

These chapters are not just intellectual frameworks but poetic evocations of mystical states. Guru's method is to begin with the common experience of the phenomenal world, gradually revealing its transitory and illusory nature, and guiding the reader toward the inner, changeless self.

The Vision of Superimposition and Negation

Adhyāropa Darśanam (Vision by Superimposition)

Verse 1

ആസീദഗ്രേ സദേവേദം
ഭുവനം സ്വപ്നവത് പുനഃ
സസർജ്ജ സർവം സങ്കല്പ-
മാത്രേണ പരമേശ്വരഃ

In the beginning there was
Non-existence indeed;
Dreamwise then again by mere willing

Everything existent created He, the Lord Supreme.

Sree Narayana Guru's 'Darśanamālā' immediately plunges into mysticism by tackling the ultimate origin of existence, revealing the world as a dream-like creation of the Supreme Lord (*Parameśvara*). The very first verse, "In the beginning there was Non-existence indeed; Dreamwise then again by mere willing Everything existent created He, the Lord Supreme," posits that the universe, in its manifest form, was *non-existent* before creation, a state only transcended by the Lord's mere will (*sankalpa*). This radical idea, mirroring Upaniṣadic thought, establishes a cosmic dream narrative: just as a dream arises

from and dissolves into the dreamer's mind, so too does the entire cosmos emanate from and ultimately dissolve into the consciousness of *Parameśvara*. This isn't about a personal deity but about the primordial causal Substance, emphasizing that true reality lies solely in the ultimate, uncaused 'sat', a core mystical insight.

The poem's mystical depth is further emphasized by its method of understanding this creation. The concept of *Adhyāropa*—the superimposition of form onto a fundamental reality—is central. Like waves on water, the world, though appearing distinct, is merely a form projected onto the singular underlying substance of *Parameśvara*. This perspective directly challenges the common perception of the world as undeniably real, guiding the seeker towards the profound realisation that everything we perceive is ultimately an illusion (*Maya*), existing only within the divine consciousness. When a spiritual aspirant achieves enlightenment, they experience the world's dissolution into their own being, mirroring *Parameśvara*'s "waking up" from the cosmic dream, thus underscoring the non-dual nature of the seeker and the Supreme Reality. The poem's opening, subtly invoking the Absolute through the letter 'A' and the timeless word 'āsīt', sets a deeply contemplative tone, inviting the reader into this experiential journey of realising ultimate oneness.

വാസനാമയമേവാദാ-
വാസീദിദമഥ പ്രഭുഃ
അസൃജന്മായയാ സ്വസ്യ
മായാവീവാഖിലം ജഗത്

vāsanāmayam
evādāvāsīdidam atha prabhuḥ
asrjan māyayā svasya
māyāvīvā khilam jagat

In the beginning in the form of
incipient memory factors,
All this remained. Then the Lord
By his own power of false
presentiment, like a magician
Created all this world of change.

This verse (verse 2,) poetically asserts that, in the beginning, "All this remained" merely as latent potentials or "incipient memory factors" (*vāsanā*). Then, the Lord (*Prabhu*), through an inherent, mysterious power akin to "false presentiment" or illusion (*māyā*), brought forth this entire, ever-changing world, "like a magician." This evokes a central tenet of Advaita Vedanta: the universe is not a creation *ex nihilo* but an emanation from an ultimate reality, manifested through an inexplicable divine power, thus blurring the lines between creation, illusion, and consciousness itself.

The poem's mystical core lies in its depiction of the Lord as a cosmic magician (*māyāvī*), who, by His own *māyā*, conjures the entirety of existence. This metaphor is deeply mystical because it implies that the perceived world, with all its diversity, is fundamentally an illusory manifestation from a singular, ultimate reality. We, as observers, are part of this grand magic trick, and our inability to fully grasp its secret is termed *ajñāna* (ignorance) in Vedanta. The Guru's mystical insight encourages us not to seek a rational explanation for creation, but to realise that we are an inseparable part of this "Great Mystery," allowing us to live with the "blissful freedom of being part of this inexplicable whole." This deepens the mystical experience from an intellectual concept to an experiential realisation of cosmic oneness and divine play.

Nirvana and the Synthesis

The culmination comes in *Nirvana Darsanam*. Here, Guru celebrates the mystical state of complete liberation.

Sree Narayana Guru's use of Nirvāṇa as a concluding theme in his works, though more commonly associated with Buddhist canons, perfectly aligns with the ultimate goal of Vedantic philosophy. In this context, Nirvāṇa is synonymous with Mokṣa, or Final Liberation. It signifies the extinguishing of all suffering inherent in phenomenal existence, leading to a state beyond duality.

By emphasizing Nirvāṇa, Guru remains consistent with the customary trajectory of Advaita Vedanta, which seeks to extinguish the illusion of separateness and suffering through the realisation of ultimate oneness with the Absolute. This strategic choice of terminology underscores the universal nature of liberation, transcending sectarian distinctions while deeply rooting the concept within the Advaitic framework of non-duality.

This liberation is not a place or a time-bound event. It is a condition of being — or rather, of pure, non-dual awareness. It is mukti, not merely an end, but a beginning of true seeing.

Finally, in Jnana-Karma-Samuchchaya Darsanam, Guru affirms that wisdom and action must go hand in hand. The mystic is not an escapist but a realised being living in the world.

The profound state of Nirvana can be experienced in two fundamental ways: as a living realisation during one's lifetime, often termed Jivanmukti, or as the complete cessation of the individual entity at the moment of death, referred to as Videhamukti. The path to this ultimate liberation is remarkably diverse. For some, it necessitates rigorous spiritual disciplines and unwavering effort, while others may attain it through gentler, more intuitive means. A rare few seem to achieve this effortless transcendence. Regardless of the journey, the experience of Nirvana remains intensely personal and defies complete intellectual comprehension or even intuitive grasping by another. Mystics and enlightened beings embodying this state might continue to engage in worldly affairs, appearing to live a normal life, or they may choose a path of profound, complete detachment, entirely withdrawing from the world.

When Nirvana is understood as the dissolution of the individual at death, a significant belief in Indian traditions posits a distinction between pure and impure Nirvana. Those who achieve pure Nirvana are believed to transcend the cycle of rebirth entirely, attaining ultimate freedom. Conversely, those who reach an "impure" state of Nirvana are thought to face rebirth, implying that certain subtle causative factors, or *vasanas* (latent tendencies), still persist. This aligns with ancient Indian wisdom that recognized the profound impact of an individual's actions and *vasanas* on their surroundings and, crucially, on future generations—a concept that likely informed the intricate theory of reincarnation. Just as the receding tide loses its capacity to generate new waves, the state of pure, rebirthless Nirvana signifies the complete and utter cessation of all such causative factors, leading to an unbroken, liberated existence beyond the phenomenal world.

Thus, *Darshanamala* is a manual of applied mysticism. Its beauty lies not only in its profound content but also in the symmetry of its structure and the evocative power of its verses.

4.1.6 Daivadasakam and Universal Mystical Prayer

Among Sree Narayana Guru's mystical works, *Daivadasakam* (Ten Verses to God) occupies a unique and beloved position. Unlike the structurally philosophical *Darshanamala* or the introspective depth of Atmopadesa Śatakam, *Daivadasakam* is a compact prayer-poem composed in simple Malayalam, accessible to all, and yet infused with profound mystic insight. Its universal appeal lies in how it gently guides readers — regardless of background or faith belief — into a contemplative awareness of the Divine as both personal protector and impersonal presence.

This prayer has been widely accepted across Kerala and beyond, sung in schools, gatherings, and spiritual centres as invacation. Its simplicity is deceptive — beneath the childlike appeal lies a mystic structure grounded in Advaita Vedanta, subtly affirming non-dualism, divine immanence, and surrender.

Structure and Thematic Flow of Daivadasakam

The prayer is composed in ten verses, each building upon the last in a thematic sequence:

1. Surrender to God as the supreme protector
2. Recognition of divine providence in daily life
3. Acknowledgment of life's journey through change
4. Understanding God as the guide and source
5. Identification with the cosmic scheme
6. Submission of all action to God's will
7. Renunciation of self-will and ego
8. Desire for unity with the Divine
9. Call for the grace to serve all beings
10. Celebration of victoryof the God's mercy

The movement is from the outer to the inner, from seeking help to surrender, and finally to identification with the universal Self. It mirrors the inner transformation described in Guru's other mystical works, but in a more emotive, prayerful tone.

God as the Guide Through the Ocean of Change

One of the central mystical metaphors in *Daivadasakam* is that of life as a voyage across an ocean, with God as the captain of a steamship. This modern image captures the constant flux of the world (*samsara*) and the need for divine guidance:

"Through the ocean of change and becoming, You are the greatest Captain, Guiding us safely to the other shore, Where all becomes still and free."

Here, the world is transient and ever-moving, but within this change, the devotee seeks stability. The mystic understanding is that change is not to be feared, but navigated with inner awareness — the divine being the centre of stillness amid the storm.

This image is not only poetic but profoundly philosophical. Guru implies that moksha (liberation) is not escape from the world, but arriving at inner equanimity amid life's journey. The Captain is not just external — the deeper reading sees the Divine as the inner Self-guiding the ship of body and mind.

Mystic Vision of the Divine in All Things

Verse 5 presents a panoramic mystical vision where all elements of existence are identified with God:

"As ocean, wave, wind and depth — Let us within see the scheme: Of us, nescience, You, glory and You — All moving as one flowing stream."

This verse compresses the core of non-dualism (*Advaita*). The world of appearances (waves and wind) and the unseen depth (the divine glory) are not separate — they form a continuous whole. Guru points to a vision of interconnectedness — a hallmark of mysticism. The "scheme" here is not logical, but experiential: to see the One moving in all forms, including the illusory (*nescience*), is the mystic's gift.

The poetic use of repetition and rhythm here evokes the rhythm of waves and breath. Aesthetically, it brings serenity; philosophically, it imparts insight.

Surrender, Service, and Non-Dual Fulfilment

As the prayer progresses, Guru shifts tone from description to deepening surrender. In verses 6–8, the devotee lets go of personal striving:

"May our every action be Your work, Our life lived as Your own will, And all our joy and pain accepted, With the calm of one who is still."

This is karma yoga in poetic form — offering every action to the divine. This act of surrender dissolves ego, which Guru later identifies as the source of bondage. The tone is neither fearful nor helpless. It is the gentle peace of one who has seen the futility of control and now flows with the Divine rhythm.

Verse 9 introduces a beautiful ethical-mystic vision:

"May we, in Your name, serve all, Loving each being as part of You. Let no selfish wish veil our hearts — Only the One, shining through."

This is the fruition of mysticism — not withdrawal, but compassionate service. Guru reiterates here that true mystic vision sees God in all. Hence, *Daivadasakam* is not escapist; it is a call to live as a mystic in the world — acting with selflessness, love, and clarity.

The Final Invocation: Mystic Joy and Liberation

The tenth verse rises to a celebratory climax:

"Victory to You, Ocean of Mercy! Victory to the One without end! You who move in all our lives, Be our guide, our Self, our friend."

This is not a triumph over enemies, but over ignorance. The victory that is of the awareness over delusion, love and fear. It affirms the essential Upaniṣadic truth: the One we seek is already within. The mystic has not gone anywhere, but awakened to what always was.

Aesthetically, the repetition of "Victory" (*Jaya!*) gives the stanza the mood of a chant — uplifting, rhythmic, and communal. It serves as both a personal surrender and a collective anthem, making *Daivadasakam* not only a mystical text but a universal prayer.

Thus, Sree Narayana Guru's poetic journey was never merely literary — it was a path of profound spiritual realisa-

tion, a channel for philosophical clarity, and a transformative medium for social upliftment. As a mystic poet, he fused the inner vision of self-realisation with outer compassion and action. His poems are not simply to be read, but to be meditated upon — they are experiences encoded in verse.

Across works like Atmopadesa Śatakam, *Darshanamala*, and *Daivadasakam*, Guru consistently demonstrates that mysticism is not esoteric or inaccessible. Rather, it is the most natural state of the human being — when the mind quietens, when ego recedes, and when awareness opens to the unity of all existence. His mystic path is democratic, inclusive, and deeply ethical. There are no barriers of caste, class, or creed. The only requirement is sincerity, introspection, and a willingness to look within.

What distinguishes Guru's mystic poetry is its seamless integration of Advaita Vedanta with lyrical beauty. He draws from classical Sanskrit traditions, Tamil bhakti impulses, and Malayalam folk rhythms, but filters them through his unique vision — one that is rooted in direct experience rather than doctrinal allegiance. His voice resonates with both the rigour of the philosopher and the tenderness of the bhakta.

Critically, Guru's mystical poetry must be seen in the context of Kerala's spiritual renaissance, where mysticism was not withdrawal from society but a force of ethical reformation. Guru's mysticism was active — it opposed caste discrimination, reformed temple practices, and called for universal education and human dignity. Through the beauty of verse, he enacted a social revolution grounded in inner realisation.

Moreover, Guru's mystic verses align with global traditions. He stands in kinship with Rumi, Kabir, St. John of Arc, and Lao Tzu — poets who transcended religious boundaries and spoke the language of the soul. Like them, Guru used poetry not to escape the world but to re-enchant it — to reveal the divine shimmering in every face, every form, every moment.

Recap

- Mysticism: inner experience of the divine
- Beyond doctrine and ritual
- Focus on soul's transformation
- Universal across religions
- Language as veil and revelation
- Symbols drawn from nature
- Light and ocean metaphors
- "Snake and rope" analogy

- Emphasis on detachment
- Atmopadesha Śatakam: 100 verses
- Verse 1: "karu" seed metaphor
- Verse 2: senses as divine form
- Horses and charioteer image
- Use of negation and paradox
- Daivadasakam: ten-verse prayer
- Life as ocean voyage
- God as inner Captain
- Vision of non-duality
- "See the sea, not the waves"
- Inner light vs. outer appearances
- Ethical action as worship
- Bliss as natural state
- Social reform via mysticism
- One caste, one religion slogan
- Mysticism as democratic and inclusive

Objective Questions

1. What term describes spiritual illusion?
2. Which Vedantic school emphasizes non-duality?
3. What is the Sanskrit for bliss?
4. *Atmopadeśa Śatakam* comprises how many verses?
5. Which prayer-poem has ten verses?
6. The metaphor of waves and sea illustrates what?

7. Which animal-rope analogy explains illusion?
8. God as guide in life equals which metaphor?
9. Mystical silence and bliss denote what?
10. Mystic poets often use which figure of speech?

Answers

1. Maya
2. Advaita
3. Ananda
4. Hundred
5. Daivadasakam
6. Unity
7. Snake
8. Captain
9. Transcendence
10. Metaphor

Assignments

1. Discuss how the "snake and rope" metaphor illustrates Maya in Guru's poetry.
2. Analyse the role of ethical action in Sree Narayana Guru's mystical vision.
3. Compare mystical language to doctrinal discourse in at least two traditions.
4. Explain how symbols of light function in expressing non-duality.
5. Evaluate the social implications of Guru's slogan "one caste, one religion, one God."

UNIT

Tradition of Bhakti Poetry in India

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- outline the historical development of the Bhakti movement in India
- differentiate Nirguṇa and Saguṇa Bhakti streams
- identify core traits shared by Bhakti poets across regions
- assess Sree Narayana Guru's contribution to Bhakti poetry

Prerequisites

The Bhakti movement, beginning around the 6th century CE, democratized spirituality by celebrating devotion (bhakti) in vernacular languages, breaking away from caste-based exclusivity and complex Sanskrit rituals. Poets like the Tamil Alvars and Nayanars, and later Sant figures—Kabir, Tukaram, Meera Bai—placed personal, emotional surrender at the heart of religious life.

Despite varying theological emphases—formless God in Kabir's Nirguṇa Bhakti versus personal deity in Meera Bai's Saguṇa Bhakti—all shared intense emotional imagery, everyday language, inclusiveness, and a critique of rigid orthodoxy. Sree Narayana Guru absorbed this ethos, writing devotional hymns in Malayalam, Tamil, and Sanskrit to unite spiritual insight with social reform.

Key themes

Bhakti, Nirguṇa, Saguṇa, Vernacular, Grace, Egalitarianism, Devotion

Discussion

Introduction

The Bhakti movement in India emerged as a transformative spiritual and literary phenomenon, beginning around the 6th century CE and continuing through the medieval period. It swept across the subcontinent, cutting across linguistic, regional, and social barriers. Its central ethos was devotion (*bhakti*)—a deep, emotional, and personal bond between the devotee and the divine. The movement marked a radical departure from rigid ritualism and caste-based exclusivity by placing love and surrender at the heart of spiritual life.

Bhakti poets composed their verses in regional languages — Tamil, Kannada, Marathi, Hindi, Bengali, and later Malayalam — making spiritual truths accessible to the common people. Some of the earliest Bhakti poets include the Alvars and Nayanars of Tamil Nadu, whose passionate hymns to Vishnu and Shiva expressed ecstatic union and longing. This tradition was followed by Saint poets like Kabir, Tulsidas, Surdas, Meera Bai, Tukaram, and Namdev, who composed in vernacular languages and focused on inner devotion rather than outer rituals.

While stylistic and theological differences existed — for instance, between the Nirguna Bhakti (formless God, as seen in Kabir) and Saguna Bhakti (devotion to a deity with form, as seen in Meera Bai or Tulsidas) — all Bhakti poetry shared a few fundamental traits:

- Emotional intensity and personal relationship with God
- Use of everyday language and imagery
- Emphasis on love, surrender, and grace
- Rejection of casteism and religious orthodoxy
- Inclusiveness — welcoming women, Dalits, and commoners into the spiritual fold

This egalitarian and intimate spirituality formed a fertile background for Sree Narayana Guru, who emerged much later in Kerala but absorbed and reshaped the Bhakti spirit in his own poetic language.

4.2.1 The Influence of Tamil Siddha Tradition and Bhakti Poetry

In his essay "Kavithayude Darshanam, Darshanathinte Kavitha," E.V. Ramakrishnan suggests that Narayana Guru was likely drawn to the Tamil Siddha tradition because it served as a counter-tradition. The writer noted that the Tamil Siddhas did not rely on pilgrimage centers, idol worship, holy books, or rituals. Ramakrishnan pointed out that they accepted the human body as equal to the soul and rejected ideologies

that upheld hierarchical dominance in society. He further highlighted that even today, ordinary people in Tamil Nadu sing the songs of the Siddha poets, which were composed in local dialects with simple, folk melodies (Shishir Kumar Das, 148-154).

Ramakrishnan went on to explain that poets like Sivavakkiyar, Pattinathar, and Pambatti Siddhar directly addressed the people. He observed, however, that their poetic language often contained certain mysteries. The writer stated that Siddha poetry was frequently composed in "Sandhya Bhasha"—a twilight language filled with puzzles, riddles, and coded metaphors. He also mentioned that this twilight language could be found in some Pali-language Bhakti poems (Das, 157-158) and was common in Tantric Buddhism, appearing in various forms of Bhakti poetry that spread across India after originating from Kashmir.

Kabir, in one of his couplets, compares Sanskrit to the stagnant water of a well and regional languages to a constantly flowing stream. His poem *Ulat Bamsi* (Upside-Down Language) questions common sense and depicts the world with strange and contradictory metaphors. For example, in one poem, Kabir writes:

'ആരെങ്കിലും എനിക്കി തലതിരിഞ്ഞ വേദം വിശദീകരിച്ച് തരുമോ?
വെള്ളത്തിന് തീ പിടിക്കുന്നു അന്ധർക്ക് കാണാൻ കഴിയുന്നു
തവള അഞ്ച് സർപ്പങ്ങളെ വിഴുങ്ങുന്നു
പോത്ത് കടുവയെ പിടിച്ചു ആട് ചെന്നായയെ തിന്നു
മാൻ പുള്ളിപ്പുലിയെ കൊന്നു'.

This poetry dismantles the hierarchical worldview of fixed truths. As A.K. Ramanujan observed, the Bhakti tradition does not present a black-or-white, either-or approach. Instead, it embraces a "both/and" perspective. It doesn't separate feeling from thought, or experience from idea.

Such poets were not driven by religious dogma. As historian Romila Thapar notes, Bhakti poets did not act as spokespersons for any single religious doctrine. The acceptance they gained was due to the people's desire for freedom and dignity. They used a vocabulary born out of lived experiences and challenged the ideological dominance of oppressive systems.

4.2.2 Guru's Place Within the Bhakti Tradition

Sree Narayana Guru occupies a distinctive place in the Indian Bhakti tradition. Though he lived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—long after the medieval Bhakti movement reached its zenith—his poetry clearly resonates with the themes, values, and devotional sensibility of classical Bhakti literature. At the same time, Guru infuses the tradition with his own spiritual insights rooted in Advaita Vedanta, social reformist zeal, and linguistic simplicity.

Guru's poetic expressions of devotion are found across several works—*Shiva Shatakam*, *Subrahmanya Ashtakam*, *Daivadasakam*, *Vinayaka Ashtakam*, and *Bhadrakali Ashtakam*—each echoing emotional surrender, reverence, and universal spiritual values. These compositions are intimate invocations of divine presence, filled with humility and grace, often drawing from his personal experiences of mystical realisation.

A hallmark of Bhakti poetry is the direct, emotional relationship between the devotee and the divine. Guru adopts this tone in his verses. In *Daivadasakam*, for example, he writes:

"You are the Captain, I am the passenger;

Guide me through this ocean of becoming."

This intimate metaphor of life as a turbulent ocean and God as a guiding force is a classic Bhakti trope, bringing together deep dependence and loving faith. Yet, Guru enhances it with philosophical layering: the "ocean" is also *samsara*, the realm of illusion and suffering.

Another key aspect of Bhakti is the democratisation of devotion—rejecting priestly mediation, caste discrimination, and Sanskritic exclusivity. Guru exemplified this through both his poetry and his actions. He composed in Malayalam, Sanskrit, and Tamil, reaching diverse audiences. His famous invocation:

"Oru Jati, Oru Matham, Oru Daivam Manushyanu"
(One caste, one religion, one God for humanity)
(One in kind, one in faith, one in God is man)

was not just a slogan—it was the underlying message of his devotional poetry, aimed at uniting people across social and spiritual divides.

Unlike some earlier Bhakti saints who confined their expressions to a particular deity or sect, Guru's approach was pluralistic and inclusive. He praised Shiva, Subrahmanya, Devi, and Ganesha, not as separate entities but as symbolic forms of the one Supreme Reality (*Brahman*). This reflects both his Bhakti fervour and Advaitic insight. His verse from *Shiva Shatakam* exemplifies this synthesis:

"You, the Shiva who shines within,
Not in temple, image, or stone;
But as the light of the inner eye,
In every being, You alone."

This poetic vision is mystical and devotional at once. It dismantles superficial ritualism while maintaining heartfelt reverence. Here, Guru aligns with Bhakti poets like Kabir, who rejected external ritual but preserved deep devotion.

Furthermore, Guru's Bhakti is not passive or sentimental—it is active, ethical, and reformist. His poetry consistently emphasises awareness, compassion, and righteous action. Even in works that seem purely devotional, the tone is transformative. As observed in *Sree Narayana Guru: Voice of the Voiceless*, his devotional works became tools for awakening individual dignity and collective consciousness among Kerala's oppressed communities.

In this sense, Guru stands as a modern Bhakti poet who blends emotional devotion, mystical insight, and social revolution. He inherits the rich Bhakti tradition and rearticulates it in the language of his time—with clarity, depth, and compassion.

Bhakti Poetry and Colonial Knowledge Systems

When *Thunchaththu Ezhuthachan* and *Poonthanam* composed their poetry, the modern intellectual movements that questioned social hierarchies had not yet entered Kerala. In India, knowledge systems were shaped by several practices that incorporated the logic of **positivism**. These practices classified and divided everything — from languages to land — under a structured gaze. Even caste was understood through official processes such as census reports and demographic data..

Narayana Guru had to resist not only this colonial epistemology but also Brahmin-centred and varna-based knowledge structures. Both these systems attempted to standardise and homogenise identities, making those who didn't fit

their mould invisible or untouchable. Guru's poetry stands as a rebellion against such dehumanising knowledge systems. His poetic practice reclaims the dignity of human beings.

Guru was not writing commentaries on Shaiva Siddhanta or Advaita philosophy. Instead, his poetry creates critical discourses on systems of knowledge. When structures of dominance fragment the reality and alienate an entire society from self-realisation, Guru takes on the task of consciously redefining knowledge and awareness.

Earlier we saw how Kabir used absurdity in language to challenge existing value systems. Similarly, even though Narayana Guru maintained a life of detachment from worldly affairs, he consistently responded to the injustices and immoral practices of his time. *Nisar Ahmad* explains how Guru's concept of *nirbaadhyatha* (freedom from hindrance) opens up new interpretative possibilities and shows the path to liberation for those on the journey of life (41).

The inevitable tensions that arise from identity conflicts are part of the lived experiences of the modern self. What Guru does through his poetic expressions is to build a bridge between this troubled context and Indian (or South Asian) philosophical traditions.

4.2.3 Emotional Depth and Personal Voice in Guru's Devotional Poetry

One of the defining features of Bhakti poetry across centuries is its ability to blend emotional intensity with spiritual aspiration. In this regard, Sree Narayana Guru's devotional works continue the tradition with poignant sensitivity and introspective richness. His poems, while deeply philosophical, do not sacrifice emotional resonance. They maintain a balance between rational clarity and heartfelt devotion, demonstrating that mysticism need not be abstract and distant, but can be deeply personal and emotionally charged.

Guru's poems often express a longing for divine presence, a surrender of the self, and a plea for inner transformation. In *Daivadasakam*, the emotional tone is tender and childlike:

"You who gave us this body, And placed us in this world, Take us across the sea of life With your mercy and grace unfurled."

The devotee here is humble, almost vulnerable. The tone is not of doctrinal certainty but of devotional pleading — seeking safety, direction, and grace. This simplicity is part of the effectiveness and charm of the poem. It resonates with the Bhakti principle that God is not distant but ever near, responding to sincere prayer.

Similarly, in *Subrahmanya Ashtakam*, Guru portrays Lord Subrahmanya not just as a warrior deity, but as a source of inner wisdom and protection:

"Oh Subrahmanya, Lord of wisdom, Dispel the darkness within my mind; Let your spear pierce through my ignorance, That I may your presence find."

This verse exemplifies the Bhakti style of seeking divine help not for worldly gain but for inner clarity. The emotional tone is earnest, blending humility with reverence.

Guru's personal voice is also evident in his approach to symbolism and metaphors. Instead of relying solely on classical allusions, he uses accessible imagery that evokes shared experience — such as boats,

journeys, seeds, light, and waves. This makes his devotion relatable, grounded in lived life. For example, the recurring image of the ocean in *Daivadasakam* becomes both a metaphor for samsara and a symbol of spiritual depth:

"Through the ocean of becoming, Be Thou our Captain and guide."

Here, the divinity is invoked not as a distant ruler, but as a trusted pilot navigating the turbulent waters of existence. The emotional appeal lies in the immediacy of the imagery and the relational closeness it establishes.

Another emotional motif found in his poetry is that of divine motherhood, particularly in *Bhadrakali Ashtakam*. Guru describes Devi with both fearsome and nurturing attributes, echoing the dual nature of the cosmic mother — a theme richly explored in Bhakti literature:

"O Bhadrakali, fierce and kind, Mother of time and space, From your wrath and love alike, Springs forth your boundless grace."

This maternal imagery invites devotion that is intimate and intense — the kind of relationship a child might have with a powerful, compassionate mother.

Through these emotional tones and personal metaphors, Guru brings depth to his poetry without theatrical sentimentality. He avoids exaggerated expressions, maintaining dignity and restraint. The emotional power arises naturally from the inner experience of the poet-seer. In this way, his poetry stands in the lineage of saints like Surdas and Meera Bai — expressive yet profound, personal yet universal.

4.2.4 Guru's Synthesis of Bhakti and Jnana

One of the most remarkable contributions of Sree Narayana Guru to Indian spiritual literature is his seamless synthesis of Bhakti (devotion) and Jnana (knowledge or wisdom). In many classical traditions, these two paths have often been seen as distinct or even opposing — the emotional surrender of the heart versus the intellectual inquiry of the mind. However, Guru's poetic vision harmoniously unites them, revealing that true devotion and true knowledge are not separate but complementary.

This synthesis is not just theoretical; it is poetically embodied in works such as Atmopadesa Śatakam, *Darshanamala*, and *Daivadasakam*. His verses urge self-inquiry while simultaneously nurturing a personal, emotional connection to the Divine.

Sree Narayana Guru's poetry seamlessly integrates devotion and wisdom, showcasing a unique mystical approach. For instance, in Atmopadesa Śatakam, he articulated that when one perceives the world as their own Self, love arises not from desire, but as an illumination of wisdom. This profound vision merges love and knowing, dissolving all sense of duality through pure insight. Here, the emotion of love becomes a powerful conduit for spiritual understanding. Guru redefined devotion, not as mere dependence or petition, but as the recognition of one's own self within all beings—a deep compassion born from awareness.

In Daivadasakam, while expressing humble prayer, the content reveals a deeper Vedantic realisation. The divine is invoked not merely as a personal savior but

as the indwelling Self. The essence of the prayer is a plea for guidance to perceive the divine in everyone and to serve all beings as manifestations of the divine form. It advocates that wisdom should be the mode of worship and love the guiding principle of daily life. This harmonious blend of devotion (bhakti) and knowledge (jnana) exemplifies a unified spiritual path where the heart yearns for God, and the mind simultaneously realises that the divine resides within. This perspective resonates strongly with the teachings found in the Bhagavad Gita, where a similar emphasis is placed on seeing the divine in all creations.

Guru's profound insight lies in his ability to articulate these lofty philosophical concepts in accessible and lyrical Malayalam, Tamil, and Sanskrit. He championed an integrated spiritual approach, not favoring one path over another. Instead, he presented devotion as wisdom in action and wisdom as the natural flowering of love. In Darshanamala, particularly in the Bhakti Darsanam chapter, Guru elevated devotion to a sublime act of perceiving the Divine in all forms. He conveyed that one who recognizes the Lord in all beings loves them as their own kin, and through this love, true knowledge blossoms, dispelling ignorance. This powerful testament to the inseparability of knowledge and love shows how the act of knowing leads to love, and the act of loving paves the way for wisdom. This holistic approach gives Guru's poetry a timeless and modern relevance, unifying spiritual depth with ethical engagement. This synthesis allowed Guru to connect with a broad audience, appealing to both the emotional heart of devotees and the reflective mind of intellectual seekers. In doing so, Guru fundamentally redefined Bhakti poetry in modern Indian literature, presenting it not as a departure from reason but as its spiritual culmination.

Being Contemporary – Guru's Poetic Temporality

To truly understand Sree Narayana Guru's poetic temporality, one must move beyond merely situating him within the spatial and temporal confines of Malayalam poetry. As the philosopher Giorgio Agamben eloquently argues, a genuine contemporary is not simply someone who aligns with the prevailing currents of their era. Instead, a true contemporary possesses the profound ability to detach themselves from the immediate demands of their time, viewing it through the critical lens of alternative possibilities. Such an individual does not bask in the superficial "light" of their age but confronts its underlying "darkness" and hidden contradictions. To illuminate these obscurities, the contemporary often finds it necessary to articulate their vision in a voice that resonates from a different temporal plane, drawing on wisdom that transcends the fleeting present.

This unique temporal positioning allows the contemporary to liberate themselves from the perceived obligations to both the past and the future. This liberation manifests profoundly in the utterances of figures traditionally marginalized—the outcast, the wandering ascetic, the "mad" lover—those who stand deliberately outside conventional historical continuity and rigid social identities. By adopting this stance, they are able to confront and address the inherent fractures and dilemmas of the present not through full immersion, but by a subtle yet critical stepping outside of its immediate pressures. The contemporary, therefore, arrives "out of joint" with their era, not precisely "on time," and their vision becomes a powerful testament to

truths and possibilities that cannot be fully realised or contained within the dominant paradigms of the present moment. Through the deliberate unfamiliarity and transformative power of his poetic expressions, Sree Narayana Guru intricately constructs a new archaeology of human experience, delving into layers of consciousness often overlooked by conventional thought.

Guru's poetic lineage extends far beyond geographical and linguistic boundaries, embracing not just the Tamil Siddha masters like Tirumular and Pambatti Siddhar, but also spiritual giants such as Jnanadev, Kabir, and Tukaram. These figures are not present in his work as mere academic references, but as residual voices—echoes of timeless wisdom—and profound spiritual presences that inform and enrich his own mystical insights. To engage with Guru's poetry is to travel on a journey of heightened awareness, a radical awakening to a world that perpetually recedes into shadow, a realm that paradoxically darkens because everything appears possible, yet remains perpetually elusive. His verses invite us to perceive the deep paradoxes of existence, where the promise of infinite potential clashes with the persistent feeling of unattainability. This confrontation with the inherent obscurity and elusive nature of reality is precisely where Guru's contemporary voice resonates most powerfully, challenging us to look beyond surface appearances and acknowledge the profound mysteries that underpin our seemingly knowable world.

4.2.5 Bhakti, Reform, and Social Liberation in Guru's Poetry

Sree Narayana Guru's devotional poetry stands out for its profound connection to social reform and collective liberation. Unlike many traditional Bhakti poets who focused solely on individual spiritual experiences, Guru expanded the scope of devotion to encompass ethical awakening, social justice, and the upliftment of society as a whole. His Bhakti was never merely inward-looking; it served as a dynamic force aimed at transforming society from within, by touching the heart and elevating the soul of every individual.

Guru lived in a Kerala deeply scarred by rigid caste hierarchies, the practice of untouchability, and pervasive religious exclusivism. While other reformers of his era employed prose and speeches to challenge these injustices, Guru uniquely leveraged the powerful medium of poetry, particularly devotional poetry, to inspire both internal spiritual growth and external societal change. Through verses that resonated directly with the masses, he instilled a deep sense of dignity, unity, and self-respect among the marginalized. A potent illustration of this can be found in Jati Nirnayam (An Inquiry into Caste), where he exposed the sheer absurdity of caste distinctions. He conveyed that all are born from the same womb and share the same circulating blood, yet people continue to perpetuate divisions of high and low, questioning the very origin of such falsehoods. Although not a conventional devotional hymn, this verse embodies the true spirit of devotion to truth and justice. It bravely challenges oppressive societal structures in the name of divine unity, urging readers to recognize all beings as manifestations of the same sacred essence.

Guru's Bhakti compositions, especially his widely recited Daivadasakam, became powerful spiritual tools for mass awareness, publicly shared in schools and community gatherings. In these verses, Guru reimagined God not as a distant, remote power, but as a compassionate guide for all humanity. He implored the

divine to act as a captain and compass, guiding individuals through the turbulent ocean of samsara (the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth), ensuring that divisive forces like caste, greed, and hatred would not pull people away from the path of dharma. This was more than a prayer for personal peace; it was a profound plea for collective harmony and liberation. Guru's poetry thus called for a societal awakening rooted in spiritual consciousness—a form of Bhakti that aimed to uplift the downtrodden, unite the divided, and enlighten the ignorant, fostering a truly inclusive and just community.

In poems such as Vinayaka Ashtakam, Guru praised Ganesha not solely for bestowing wisdom but specifically for removing the obstacles of social inequality. His verses portrayed the deity as a remover of both inner ignorance and external injustice, seeking divine intervention to break the chains of pride and guide humanity towards a light where no shadow of caste could ever hide. Consequently, the Ishta Devatas (chosen deities) in Guru's Bhakti became powerful symbols of moral authority and reform, rather than mere figures for ritualistic worship. This transformative approach is reminiscent of the radical Bhakti movements spearheaded by saints like Kabir and Ravidas, who similarly utilized devotion to challenge Brahmanical hegemony and vehemently proclaim the inherent dignity of all human beings, irrespective of their social standing.

Crucially, Guru's choice of language and poetic form also mirrored his reformist Bhakti. He deliberately chose to compose his hymns in Malayalam, Tamil, and accessible Sanskrit, ensuring his profound message was inclusive and easily grasped by common people from diverse backgrounds. His tone, while gentle, remained unequivocally firm, characterized by clarity rather than philosophical complexity. The universality of his devotion is particularly evident in Daivadasakam, where he asserted that the divine light of God, embracing all creeds and paths, illuminates every lamp. He redefined worship, stating that reverence was offered not just within temples, but truly within hearts where compassion profoundly dwelled. This form of Bhakti leads not to blind adherence to rituals, but to the envisioning and actualization of a reimagined social order—a society where love, mutual respect, and profound unity reign supreme as the guiding principles of human interaction.

4.2.6 Comparative Reflections: Sree Narayana Guru and Other Bhakti Poets

To fully grasp Sree Narayana Guru's monumental contribution to Bhakti literature, it is illuminating to consider his work in conversation with other revered Bhakti poets from across India. Despite being separated by centuries and distinct regional contexts, these spiritual bards shared fundamental concerns: a profound yearning for the divine, a fierce critique of prevailing social injustices, and a deliberate choice of simple language to reach and uplift the common masses. Yet, Guru's distinct genius lay in his unparalleled ability to seamlessly integrate the emotive warmth of Bhakti with the rigorous philosophical tenets of Advaita Vedanta and the pressing demands of modern social ethics. This synthesis allowed him to craft a devotional voice that was both timeless in its spiritual profundity and remarkably timely in its engagement with contemporary societal issues.

Like the saintly poet Kabir, Guru adamantly emphasized the futility of external ritualistic religion, consistently

advocating for a direct, inner experience of the Divine. Both fearlessly questioned entrenched priestly authority and the artificial hierarchies of caste. In his famous perception, Kabir challenged the notion of God confined to mosque or idol, pondering over,to where the rest of the world belonged if the divine presence was so limited. Guru echoed this radical spirit in his own idiom, particularly in Shiva Shatakam, asserting that the divine, which shines as the innermost 'I', is beyond any temple or sacred text, and to truly know it is to directly know the Self, transcending all forms. Similarly, while Mirabai expressed her intense love for Krishna with profound personal longing and emotional abandon, Guru's devotional tone was often more serene and reflective. Yet, their shared honesty in devotion forged a powerful bond, with Meera's heartfelt declaration of finding her soul's beloved, resonating with Guru's quiet contemplation, that seeing the inner flame dissipates the night of the self, rendering external lamps unnecessary when truth itself becomes one's being.

The Marathi saint-poet Tukaram also shared Guru's fervent commitment to social justice. Tukaram's verses valiantly defended the poor and unequivocally condemned hypocrisy. Guru, however, extended this commitment beyond poetic expression by actively creating institutions—schools, temples, and philosophical texts—thereby translating Bhakti into concrete, active social reform, a key differentiator. Basavanna, the Kannada Bhakti poet, similarly challenged caste divisions and promoted devotion irrespective of birth. His powerful declaration that while the wealthy might build temples, his own body served as the divine shrine, with his legs as pillars and head as cupola, found a profound echo in Guru's Daivadasakam. Guru's work similarly proclaimed that true reverence was not offered to mere bricks, but to the divine dwelling within all beings, advocating that every home should be a temple and every heart a prayer hall, thus universalizing worship.

Stylistically, Guru diverged from many Bhakti poets who relied heavily on dramatic metaphors, overt emotional outbursts, or ecstatic imagery. Guru's verses are characterized by profound restraint, crystal clarity, and impeccable balance. His Bhakti is gentle and deeply introspective, rather than tempestuous or overtly ecstatic—more akin to a still, steady flame than a blazing, tumultuous fire. This particular characteristic renders his poetry exceptionally suited for deep meditative contemplation, inviting a quiet, profound engagement. In terms of philosophical depth, Guru stands closer to the intellectual rigor of Adi Shankaracharya, despite Shankara rarely being classified as a Bhakti poet. However, Guru achieved a truly unique and revolutionary synthesis: he seamlessly merged Shankara's profound non-dualism (Advaita) with the emotive warmth and accessibility of Bhakti, a fusion that remains remarkably rare in spiritual literature. What further distinguishes Guru is his active engagement with modernity. Unlike earlier Bhakti poets who operated within feudal or pre-modern societal frameworks, Guru directly responded to the challenges and opportunities presented by colonial modernity, scientific rationality, and the contemporary movements for social reform. He perceived no inherent conflict between reason and devotion, nor between scientific inquiry and spiritual truth, embodying a holistic vision that resonated powerfully with the evolving demands of his era.

4.2.7 Guru's Bhakti Legacy in Contemporary India

Sree Narayana Guru's Bhakti poetry has not only enriched the literary and spiritual tradition of India but has also had a profound and lasting impact on the social and cultural fabric of Kerala and beyond. His poetic vision continues to resonate in contemporary times, serving as a guiding light for spiritual seekers, reformers, educators, and literary critics alike.

In modern India, where identity politics, communal tensions, and economic disparities continue to challenge the ideal of unity, Guru's Bhakti voice offers a compelling counter-narrative — one rooted in universal love, inner awakening, and collective harmony. His invocation of one caste, one religion, and one God for humanity transcends slogans and becomes a blueprint for ethical coexistence. In this, Guru's Bhakti is not relic but remedy.

Educational institutions, spiritual centres, and literary platforms across Kerala continue to recite, study, and celebrate Guru's verses. Works like *Daivadasakam* are sung in schools, invoking the spirit of shared humanity. His temples — established on egalitarian principles — still stand as symbols of spiritual democracy. Guru's poetry remains an essential component of curricula in Malayalam literature, philosophy, and cultural studies.

Moreover, his synthesis of Bhakti and Jnana, his poetic articulation of social equality, and his advocacy for spiritual reform through inner transformation make him particularly relevant in today's world, where spiritual longing often coexists with socio-political unrest.

Writers, thinkers, and public intellectuals have increasingly turned to Guru's work for inspiration. His verses are cited in contexts ranging from social justice debates to environmental ethics, from interfaith dialogues to meditative practices. The simplicity of his language makes his messages accessible, while the depth of his vision ensures their enduring relevance.

Guru's Bhakti legacy lives on in multiple ways:

- As literature: through his rich and varied poetic corpus
- As spirituality: inspiring meditation, devotion, and ethical living
- As social reform: motivating action for equality, education, and justice
- As pedagogy: shaping values in classrooms and communities

Recap

- Began 6th century CE
- Key ethos: emotional devotion
- Alvars and Nayanars in Tamil Nadu
- Sant poets across north India
- Nirguṇa Bhakti: formless divine
- Saguṇa Bhakti: personal deity
- Rejection of caste privilege
- Use of simple imagery
- Love, surrender, and grace
- Emphasis on inner experience
- Compositions in regional tongues
- Guru's Shiva Śatakam and Ashtakams
- "Oru jāti, oru mēḍam, oru daivam" slogan
- Daivadasakam as universal prayer
- Bhakti as tool for unity
- Guru's praise of multiple deities
- Synthesizing jnana and bhakti
- Bhakti Darsanam in Darśanamala
- Ethical service as devotion
- Music and communal singing
- Accessibility to common people
- Bhakti in modern Kerala
- Critique of priestly mediation
- Devotion as social reform
- Legacy in schools and temples

SGOU

Objective Questions

1. Which century did Bhakti begin?
2. Name the Tamil poet-saints devoted to Vishnu.
3. Which poet composed Bhakti verses in Hindi?
4. Formless devotion is called…….
5. Devotion to a deity with form is…….
6. What does Guru's universal slogan means ?
7. How many verses has *Daivadasakam*?
8. What emotion does Bhakti emphasizes?
9. In which chapter is the Bhakti verse in *Darśanamala*?
10. Bhakti poetry critiqued what?

Answers

1. Sixth
2. Alvars
3. Tulsidas
4. Nirguṇa
5. Saguṇa
6. Unity
7. Ten
8. Love
9. Bhakti
10. Orthodoxy

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Assignments

1. Trace the evolution of Bhakti across two linguistic regions.
2. Analyse Guru's integration of Bhakti and Advaita in Daivadasakam.
3. Compare Nirguṇa and Saguṇa themes in Kabir and Guru's hymns.
4. Discuss how vernacular language shaped Bhakti's social impact.
5. Evaluate the role of Bhakti poetry in challenging caste hierarchies.

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UNIT

Tamil Siddha Poetry

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- describe the origins and ethos of the Tamil Siddha tradition
- explain key philosophical tenets found in Siddha verse
- identify poetic techniques—paradox, coded metaphor, koan-like verse
- assess Sree Narayana Guru's adoption of Siddha principles

Prerequisites

From the 6th to 14th centuries CE, Tamil Siddha poets (Siddhars) composed earthy, cryptic poetry in Tamil that rejected ritualism and caste privilege, emphasising direct experiential knowledge of the self and cosmos. Their verses, rich in paradox and symbolic language, functioned like spiritual riddles, pushing readers beyond intellect toward inner insight.

Sree Narayana Guru's poetry mirrors Siddha traits: concise aphorisms, agrarian and body metaphors, ethical-yogic discipline, and an insistence that liberation arises from self-realisation, not external rites. His works blend this esoteric flavour with Advaita clarity and social concern, forging a modern continuation of the Siddha lineage.

Key themes

Siddha, Sandhyā bhāṣā, Koan, Alchemy, Self-realisation, Esoteric, Paradox

Discussion

4.3.1 Tamil Siddha Poetry: Origins and Philosophy

The Tamil Siddha tradition is one of the most distinctive spiritual movements in Indian history, blending mysticism, esotericism, and fierce independence of thought. Rooted in the southern regions of India, the Siddha movement flourished between the 6th and 14th centuries CE, producing a rich body of poetry that was deeply metaphysical yet strikingly practical. The Siddhars, as these poets and seers are known, were often rebels — spiritual iconoclasts who rejected religious orthodoxy, caste barriers, and meaningless rituals in favour of direct, experiential knowledge of the self and the cosmos.

Their poetry was written in Tamil — not in the classical Sanskrit of the elite — and it often emerged from their personal spiritual realisations, recorded in cryptic yet evocative verses. The Siddha poets, such as Thirumoolar, Agastya, Pattinathar, and Ramalinga Swamigal, experienced the yogic alchemy, immortality, consciousness, the unity of self with the Absolute (Sivam), and the ethical dimensions of spiritual life. Their poems made heavy use of metaphor, paradox, and symbolic language — often defying linear logic in order to gesture toward truths that could only be experienced, not merely understood.

A Siddha verse might describe the self as a lamp that does not burn or the divine as a taste without flavour — metaphors that break conventional thought patterns to provoke inner contemplation. In many ways, Tamil Siddha poetry functions like a spiritual koan, coaxing the reader to leap beyond intellect into direct insight.

The language of Siddha poetry is earthy and lyrical, but never superficial. It carries layers of meaning — one for the casual reader, another for the seeker, and yet another for the realised mystic. It is simultaneously poetry, scripture, and philosophical provocation.

In his analysis, Udayakumar highlights how the structure of Sree Narayana Guru's prayers and petitions to Shiva evolve from expressing human anguish to seeking ultimate bliss, transitioning from ordinary speech to the profound release of renunciation. He observes that the speaker's voice gains immense intensity in the concluding stanzas, transforming into an urgent plea for liberation. This journey reflects a deeply personal yet universal spiritual quest, where the devotee navigates existential suffering to arrive at a state of profound peace and freedom through divine communion.

Udayakumar discusses "Pampatti Chinth" (also known as "Kundalini Pattu"), noting how, echoing the pampatti siddhas, the poem addresses the serpent. He suggests these verses function as a form of self-exhortation, urging and inspiring the self towards mystical realisation under the

belief that the serpent symbolises the soul itself. The writer moves into the intriguing question of whose voice summons the soul for release. He points out that unlike in poems such as "Mananatitam," the concept of the "speaker" in "Pampatti Chinth" effectively splits into two: one voice represents the mutable inner substance of the devotee, symbolised by the serpent, while the other embodies the profound insight achieved by transcending that state—a voice of pure bliss and freedom. This second voice, Udayakumar argues, cannot be attributed to any single person; it occupies a unique space, simultaneously clinging to Shiva and witnessing the serpent's merger, signifying a transcendent perspective. He also observes a similar tone in various Bhakti poems, including the Kannada vachanas and Tamil Siddha verses, where an emancipated voice, unafraid of challenging the social order, becomes a powerful vehicle for protest against caste discrimination.

Udayakumar further explains how this collective cry of petition, prayer, thirst, and summoning resonates differently across various social contexts. He emphasizes that as this voice transitioned from the Tamil Siddhas to Sree Narayana Guru's writings, it brought with it deep reflection on the intricate relationship between spirituality and social reality, leading to new styles of thought and expression. From the late nineteenth century onwards, expressions traditionally labeled "spiritual" or "mystical" began to reimagine and engage with worldly life and society in unprecedented ways. Ideas about the body, drawn from Saiva Siddhanta, re-emerged in Guru's works, forming a crucial part of his critique of caste. The philosophical argument that false discrimination distorts reality itself seamlessly evolved into the assertion that caste is precisely such a distorting, false discrimination. Many of Guru's poems addressing Shiva simultaneously feature a speaker who embodies the perspective of living within this illusory discrimination and another who has recognized its true nature.

The intimate bond between devotion (bhakti) and knowledge (jnana) is a striking feature of Sree Narayana Guru's writings, leading to a profound inquiry into the very nature of Bhakti. Udayakumar points out that the word bhakti inherently carries notions of both distance in separation and closeness in sharing. He suggests that the inner structure of Bhakti involves a yielding to intensities that transcend an individual's self-mastery, hinting that this surrender forms the foundation linking the poetic language of love to the fervent voice of devotion. Personal freedom, he argues, manifests precisely in this act of surrender and yielding, yet simultaneously involves a powerful rejection of all worldly or social structures of power. This yielding is exclusively directed towards truth and an intense, interior yearning for truth. This yearning, Udayakumar clarifies, is far from a mere private sentiment; it is an energetic disclosure that bursts through the individual's conventional shell, and it is in the pain, bliss, and intoxication of this bursting that the true intensity of Bhakti lies.

The double level of voice, initially identified in "Pampatti Chinth," becomes the very texture of self-address in Guru's later and more philosophical works, with "Atmopadesha Satakam" serving as the clearest example. Here, imperative verbs like "recite it," "bow," "remember," "know," and "awake" directly command the self and compel it towards specific spiritual actions. Udayakumar emphasizes that these observances are not confined to the mind alone; instead, the mind, speech, and body operate on an integrated level where their separation becomes impos-

sible. He concludes that this mode of self-instruction itself must be understood as a fundamental spiritual practice, highlighting Guru's method of internal dialogue as a means to profound realisation.

4.3.2 Guru's Tamil Background and Encounter with Siddha Philosophy

Sree Narayana Guru's deep engagement with Tamil culture and thought formed a crucial part of his spiritual evolution and poetic expression. Born in the southern part of Kerala, near the Tamil-speaking border regions, Guru was exposed to Tamil literature, devotional practices, and esoteric spiritual teachings from a young age. His prolonged stays in places like Aruvippuram and his travels into Tamil Nadu brought him into close contact with the enduring influence of Siddha traditions.

According to the source text, Guru's early education included studies under Tamil scholars and spiritual mentors who introduced him to Tamil scriptures and Siddha writings. His exposure was not just academic but lived — he observed the practices of Tamil ascetics, studied Tamil works like the Thirukkural, and internalised their values of ethical conduct, inner purity, and contemplative silence.

The influence of Tamil Siddha thought can be detected in the form and content of many of Guru's poems. Like the Siddhars, Guru rejected meaningless ritualism, caste-based inequality, and dogmatic religion. He also emphasised the importance of direct experience and self-realisation over theoretical knowledge. His poems are filled with references to the inner light, the need to silence the ego, and the goal of merging the individual self with the universal.

One can particularly sense this resonance in his *Daivadasakam*, which, though composed in Malayalam, exhibits the Siddha style of symbolic brevity and profound clarity.

Here, the divine is not represented through elaborate mythology, but as an internal guiding presence. This is much in the spirit of Siddha teachings that advise the seeker to find God not in external objects but within one's own consciousness.

Guru's adoption of concise verse, filled with metaphor and ethical urgency, strongly mirrors the Siddha poetic approach. His poems often read like philosophical instructions wrapped in devotional simplicity. His focus on silence, introspection, and the rejection of ego are all reflective of the Siddha precepts that elevate self-discipline and intuitive insight over intellectual display. In essence, Guru's poetic voice was shaped not only by Vedanta and Bhakti traditions but also by the esoteric wisdom and linguistic precision of Tamil Siddha poetry. This confluence helped him craft a body of work that is philosophically grounded, spiritually elevating, and socially reformative.

The body beyond caste

Again in വാക്കും വക്താവും, Udayakumar remarks that from a body defined by caste Śrī Nārāyaṇa's texts and practices project a new conception of the body, already visible in the very architecture of his bhakti poetry. In the *vairāgya* poems, the rejection of the world appears in forms of sweat and fear; yet the same poems contain the first shapes of liberation inside that very proclamation. These works should not chiefly be read as expressions of an agitated personal self; rather, they are spaces opened inside language to witness an intense experience that cracks the shell of personality. Along

with lament come images of unveiled radiance and of a yogically disciplined body. Borrowed from Śaiva Siddhānta and from the siddhas—that is, treating the body as Śiva's temple and the stage for interior practice—such imaginative styles become explicit. The concern is not only individual lives or bodies; notions of living-together—whether family or community—are likewise re-envisioned. We may see the same kind of re-claiming when Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru, in conversation with Gandhi, refused to dismiss worldly freedom and gave the term *samudāyam* ("community") a new meaning.

4.3.3 Themes and Techniques from Siddha Tradition in Guru's Poetry

The profound influence of Tamil Siddha poetry on Sree Narayana Guru's work is strikingly evident in the thematic and technical characteristics of his verses. While Guru does not explicitly cite the Siddhars or directly quote from their classical texts, the resonance in his poetic style, the symbolic motifs he employs, and the fundamental direction of his spiritual instruction are unmistakable. A consistent theme shared by both Siddha poetry and Guru's verses is the elevation of self-realisation as life's ultimate goal. Like the Siddhars, Guru strongly emphasized that liberation (*moksha*) is not attained through external rituals or pilgrimages, but through an inner awakening and the cultivation of self-knowledge. In his Atmopadesa Śatakam, a verse clearly reflects this perspective by stating that an illusory serpent disappears when its true nature as a rope is realised in the light, symbolising how the grand illusion of *Maya* vanishes with the dawn of genuine knowledge. This mirrors the Siddha rejection of salvation based on external practices and firmly asserts that the locus of spiritual truth resides within the individual, aligning with the Siddhar belief that one's own body is the true temple and breath the sacred prayer.

Another significant thematic convergence lies in the critique of ego and illusion (*maya*). The Siddha poets often utilized paradox and simplicity to expose the illusory nature of individual identity and underscore the necessity of dissolving it. Guru, with his characteristically calm yet piercing tone, conveyed a similar profound insight in Atmopadesa Śatakam. He likened the transient nature of pleasure and pain to clouds passing across the sky, while the true self, like the sky itself, remains eternally untouched and unperturbed. In terms of poetic technique, Guru's use of symbolism and direct language powerfully echoes that of the Siddhars. His verses rarely rely on elaborate mythological narratives or ornate Sanskritic phrases. Instead, he consistently employs universal elements such as light, the ocean, a seed, the wind, a mirror, and fire to convey complex spiritual truths—all of which are equally prominent and favored symbolic tools in Tamil Siddha poetry. For instance, in *Daivadasakam*, the dual reference to outer and inner light eloquently reflects a key Siddha insight into the unity of the macrocosm and microcosm, where the ocean is not merely a natural element but a symbol for the boundless divine, and light represents both physical illumination and spiritual enlightenment.

Guru's structural choices further reveal a clear Siddha influence. Many of his poems, akin to Siddhar verses, are remarkably short, aphoristic, and composed in accessible meters, making them ideal for recitation and memorization by common people. His distinct preference for clarity over complexity, for the directness of experience over convoluted explanation,

and for intuitive insight over rigid doctrine firmly places him within the venerable lineage of those mystical Tamil poets. These poets wrote less for literary acclaim or intellectual praise and more for the profound purpose of spiritual awakening. Their primary aim, which Guru deeply shared, was to empower individuals to directly perceive the truth of their own being and the nature of ultimate reality, thereby fostering a widespread spiritual and social transformation that transcended conventional boundaries.

From the solitude of Tapobhumi, once Guru stepped down into the midst of the weary and oppressed, he chose Tamil and Malayalam as his literary media. His spiritual writings in Tamil stand as evidence of Guru's special affinity with Dravidian culture and its religious heritage. One strand of the Tamil works even shows that Guru had absorbed the philosophical core of the Tamil Saiva tradition; K.P. Appan observes that "Guru's little-known avadhoota period seems to have been a pilgrimage through the Tamil regions in search of Dravidian identity" (*Charithrathe Agadhamakkiya Guru*, p. 41). Many pieces that tradition ascribes to Guru in Tamil are no longer extant. The only text we now possess is *Thevarappathikangal*. Judging by its fluent, effortless style, it is likely that Guru wrote a good deal more in Tamil. *Thevarappathikangal* was composed in 1914. In Tamil Saiva devotion the hymns of the poet-saints Appar and Sambandar are known as *Thevaram*, and the word *thevaram* itself carries the sense of privileged worship. Guru's collection contains fifty songs.

The very first *pathikam* opens with the devotee's question:

ഞാനോതയമേ! ഞാതുരുവേ!
നാമാതിയിലാ നർക്കതിയേ!
യാനോ നീയോ ആതി പരം
യാതായ് വിടുമോ! പേപായേ,
തേനാർത്തില്ലൈച്ചീരടിയാർ
തേടും നാടാമരുമാനൂർ-
കോനേ, മാൻനേർ വിഴി പാകം
കൊണ്ടായ് നയിനാർ നായകമോ!

The second *pathikam* is a prayer to that all-pervading *chit-prakāśa*, while the third praises the Omkāra. Subtle planes of vision are evoked, and Śiva-tattva is likened to the brilliance of the sun; the cycle closes by explaining how one might reach the feet of Śiva. Read aloud, these verses show that *Thevarappathikangal* inherits the popular tradition of Tamil literature.

Guru translated parts of the *Tirukkural* and the entire *Ozhivil Odukkam* into Malayalam. Both Pattambi Swamigal and Guru regarded *Ozhivil Odukkam* as an authoritative text. Dr. T. Bhaskaran points out that *Ozhivil Odukkam* exerted a marked influence on the composition of Atmopadesa Śatakam (*Maharsi Sri Narayana Guru*, p. 112).

Guru was never alien to Dravidian rhythmic patterns or folk idiom. *Kundalini Pāttu* is proof. That song became the energising nucleus of the Dravidian poetics that Malayalam verse would later evolve. Scholars think Guru wrote it during his avadhoota years in Tamilakam:

ആടു പാമ്പേ, പുനം തേടു പാമ്പേ, യരു
ളാനന്ദക്കൂത്തു കണ്ടാടു പാമ്പേ.
തിങ്കളും കൊന്നയും ചൂടുമീശൻ പദ-
പങ്കജം ചേർന്നു നിന്നാടു പാമ്പേ.
ചേർന്നു നില്ക്കുമ്പൊരുളെല്ലാം ചെന്താരൊടു
നേർന്നു പോമ്മാറു നിന്നാടു പാമ്പേ!

The twenty-two couplets of *Kundalini Pāttu* unfold the ecstasy of yogic experience (see *Malayāḷa Kavithayude Oorjabhavanam: Sreenarayanaguruvinte Kavithakal*, R. Chandrabose).

4.3.4 Guru and the Siddha Code of Living

One of the hallmarks of Tamil Siddha literature is its emphasis on ethical living and yogic discipline as essential paths to spiritual realisation. The Siddhars advocated a life of simplicity, inner purity, and conscious control over the senses. Sree Narayana Guru's poetry exhibits a strikingly similar moral and yogic ethos, grounded in the idea that true liberation arises from within and is nurtured through ethical living and meditative insight.

4.3.5 Tamil Influence on Guru's Style

Sree Narayana Guru's poetry is widely recognised for its clarity, brevity, and philosophical depth—qualities that closely align with the stylistic character of Tamil Siddha poetry. Though writing in multiple languages including Malayalam, Sanskrit, and Tamil, Guru demonstrated a consistent preference for linguistic precision and meditative simplicity, which helped distil complex spiritual insights into accessible poetic form.

Tamil Siddha poetry is known for its pithy verses, aphoristic nature, and layered symbolic expressions. While Guru did not imitate the Siddha poets, his own poetic language reveals a shared affinity for minimalism and symbolic resonance.

Guru's *Daivadasakam*, though devotional in tone, also adheres to this minimalistic style. Each of the ten verses is short, and the structure follows a pattern of humble prayer and philosophical insight. The language remains simple, and the metaphors—such as referring to life as an ocean—are left open-ended, inviting reflective engagement. By maintaining clarity and intentional brevity across his works, Guru ensured that his teachings could reach a broad audience while also serving as tools for deep introspection. This alignment with Tamil Siddha poetics demonstrates how he internalised the stylistic strengths of that tradition and re-expressed them in a form suited to his own philosophical vision.

Drawing from Dr. Ajay Shekhar's essay, "Narayana Guruvum Tamil Thaaymozhi-yum Sangha Samskara Dhaarakalum," it is asserted that evidence from works like Thevarappathikangal and Paampatti Chinthu unequivocally places Sree Narayana Guru's spiritual and poetic brilliance within the esteemed Tamil Siddha lineage in South India. Shekhar points out that in Paampatti Chinthu, there is no direct statement or even subtle hint connecting its content to yoga darsanam. He explains that when Guru does refer to yoga elsewhere, the sole image he employs is that of an aavannakennam, a pitcher of oil, suggesting a contained, practical energy rather than a complex esoteric system. Similarly, Shekhar highlights Guru's use of the comparison of new shoots emerging from a fallen tree when discussing the Vaidika Purusha Sooktha, implying a philosophy of cyclical regeneration and transformation rooted in the tangible world.

Shekhar further illuminates Guru's unique perspective of viewing the subaltern masses as nāga—a term often associated with marginalized yet powerful, primordial entities. He suggests that Guru envisioned these communities, much like later theorists Antonio Gramsci and B.R. Ambedkar, rising from beneath the crushing weight of stratified inequality. This powerful imagery of the nāga ascending from below symbolises a profound social and spiritual awakening from centuries of subjugation. Shekhar controversially reveals an incident where a composition, which Karuva

Krishnan Asan had simply noted as "Paampatti Chinthu" in his pocket-book, was later transformed by certain caste-Hindu pundits into an entirely unrelated Kundalini text, a conversion Shekhar asserts occurred without any legitimate warrant. This misinterpretation, Shekhar implies, powerfully demonstrates the inherent liberative thrust and emphasis on grass-roots level transformation that fundamentally underpins Guru's earth-rooted philosophy of enlightenment. His philosophy, in Shekhar's interpretation, is not an abstract, disembodied spiritual pursuit, but one deeply connected to the lived realities and liberation of the common people, drawing its power and relevance from the very soil and communities it seeks to transform. The "earth-rooted" nature signifies a philosophy that is practical, accessible, and aimed at tangible societal betterment, rather than solely individual transcendence through esoteric practices, thereby demanding a continuous, critical re-evaluation of his teachings to uphold their true intent for justice and truth.)

Recap

- Tamil Siddha: 6th–14th c.
- Rebels against orthodoxy
- Wrote in Tamil, not Sanskrit
- Emphasis on body as temple
- Yogic alchemy and immortality
- Paradoxical, coded language
- “Lamp that doesn’t burn” metaphor
- “Taste without flavour” image
- Spiritual koan function
- Layers for seeker and mystic
- Agastya, Thirumoolar, Pattinathar
- Mystical liberation via practice
- Ethical living central
- Self-inquiry over pilgrimage
- Influence on Guru’s Daivadasakam

- Kundalini Pāṭṭu couplets
- Serpent as soul metaphor
- Ethical-yogic code in verse
- Use of agrarian symbols
- Rejecting caste via body imagery
- Guru's Malayalam stotras echo Siddha style
- Sandhyā bhāṣā in Guru's twilight verses
- Self-instruction as practice
- Liberation as inner stillness
- Continuity with Varkari and Bhakti

Objective Questions

1. What language does Siddha poetry often use?
2. Who are the major Tamil Siddha poets treating serpent theme?
3. Which imagery conveys inner stillness?
4. Is self as temple the Siddha tenet?
5. What does language function like ?
6. What did Yoga discipline emphasise?
7. Liberation in Siddha is via…….?
8. What are code-like metaphors called?
9. In which region did Siddha tradition flourish?
10. Which tradition does Guru's verse "snake and rope" mirror?

Answers

1. Sandhyā
2. Pāmbāṭṭi
3. Sky
4. True
5. Koan
6. Ethical
7. Self-realisation
8. Coded
9. Tamil
10. Siddha

Assignments

1. Examine the role of paradox in Tamil Siddha poetry.
2. Analyse how Guru adapts the serpent motif from Siddha verse.
3. Discuss the ethical-yogic code in Atmopadesha Śatakam.
4. Compare Sandhyā bhāṣā in Siddha and Guru's twilight language.
5. Evaluate the contribution of Tamil Siddha to modern devotional literature.

SGOU

Guru's Influence on Asan

UNIT

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- summarise Kumaran Asan's biographical and intellectual context
- explain key elements of Guru's Advaitic and ethical vision in Asan's work
- identify thematic and stylistic influences of Guru on Asan's poetry
- critically assess the mentor-disciple relationship in shaping Kerala's modern literature

Prerequisites

Kumaran Asan (1873–1924), a disciple of Sree Narayana Guru, became one of the foremost poets of modern Malayalam literature'. Under theGuru's mentorship, Asan absorbed Advaitic non-duality, social reform ideals, and devotional fervour, channeling these into his narrative verse and philosophical poems.

Asan's works—such as *Pushpavādi* and *Jīvakāruṇyapañcakam*—echo theGuru's principle of universal brotherhood ("all beings as kin") and ethical service. Through this fusion of mystic insight and literary grace, Asan advanced Kerala's cultural renaissance, demonstrating how spiritual mentorship can reshape poetic expression.

Key themes

Mentor-disciple, Pushpavādi, Jīvakāruṇya, Advaita, Universal love, Ethical service, Modernism

Discussion

4.4.1 Introduction

Kumaran Asan (1873–1924), one of the triumvirate poets of modern Malayalam literature, emerged as a transformative figure in Kerala's cultural and intellectual history. His poetry introduced new dimensions of philosophical thought, spiritual depth, and social reform, and much of this evolution was shaped by his close association with Sree Narayana Guru. Asan was not only a disciple but also an ardent admirer of the Guru's teachings, and this influence is visible in both the themes and techniques of his literary output.

Scholarly analysis of the Guru's works highlights the formative role he played in shaping the ideological and ethical framework within which Asan's poetic genius flourished. Guru's blend of Advaitic mysticism, ethical clarity, and social reform became the backbone of Asan's intellectual universe. While Asan was gifted with linguistic grace and narrative skill, it was Guru's guiding philosophy that gave direction to his voice.

എല്ലാവരും ആത്മസോദരർ,'

(All are spiritual brotheren), a line from *Jivakarunyapanchakam*,itself declares Guru as one who propogates the principle of absolute unity. His disciple Kumaranasan repeatedly reverberated this very thought in his own poems. In *Pushpavadi* his prayer became 'അണുജീവിയിലും സഹോദരപ്രണയം'

(even in the microbe there is the love of brother hood; in another place he imagines തരുപക്ഷി)

മൃഗങ്ങളോടും സ്നേഹരസം വേണമെന്നു ചിന്താവിഷ്ടയായ സീത'.

Reference:- തരു- It can be recognised as an addres to "Tharu". "Tharu" is the mythical tree (കല്പവൃക്ഷം) that gives everything to the devotee who begs for whatever he wants to get must give in the attitude towards birds and animals, the essence of love reflected Sita immersed in contemplation.

It was none other than Guru's example of service that turned Kumaranasan into a bard of universal love. If we impose merely human limits upon love, we may, in the end, arrive at cruel deeds.

4.4.2 Asan's Relationship with the Guru

The relationship between Kumaran Asan and Sree Narayana Guru was one of deep reverence, philosophical alignment, and literary mentorship. Asan's first encounter with Guru marked the beginning of a lifelong spiritual journey that shaped not only his worldview but also his vocation as a poet and reformer.

Great souls are those who love the poor with immeasurable, causeless affection (that is, love that seeks no profit). The Bhagavatham says that when the world burns with suffering, good people choose to burn themselves. The Purana calls such persons 'saadhu'. Only the very best can feel sorrow at the sight of another's sorrow; therefore Asan elsewhere refers to them as 'സാധിഷ്ഠർ' (the proper ones) (see *Veena Poovu*). The countless ordinary folk who bear a hundreds of kinds of hardship and misery are all the sufferers. When Christ

saw a great multitude on the seashore he was moved with compassion(the Bible: (Mark 6:34). It was the same compassionate Christ figure,signifying 'parameshapavitra-putra', that Narayanaguru recalled in *Anukampaalukalude Kathaakathanam*. Guru's glory, too, is in his love and compassion for the suffering masses. Kumarakavi meant nothing else when he praised Guru, saying that by the power of pronouncing the Guru's name countless people attain success in life: it is not a matter of five or ten chosen disciples, but of 'bahulaksham janam'—innumerable people. By coinig this expression Asan achieved not only a mere outburst of his guru-devotion but also an appreciation of human greatness itself.

Asan became closely associated with Guru through the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam, where he served as the organisation's founder general secretary. His role was not limited to administration; it was fundamentally one of intellectual partnership. Asan took upon himself the task of disseminating Guru's message of spiritual unity, social equality, and ethical living through literature and oratory. The nature of their relationship was one of guru-shishya (Guru/teacher-student)parampara,(lineage) where personal transformation occurred through the Guru's sishya's proximity and independent contemplation.

Authentic sources reveal that Guru encouraged Asan to move beyond mere poetic ornamentation and to address the real conditions of human suffering and societal injustice. This mentoring relationship led Asan to explore themes of untouchability, caste oppression, death, love, and liberation in his poetry, underpinned by the spiritual outlook imparted by the Guru.

In both personal letters and public writings, Asan consistently acknowledged the towering influence of the Guru. He credited the Guru not only for his intellectual awakening but for grounding his poetic imagination in moral discipline and spiritual insight. The emotional devotion he held for the Guru was expressed not as passive adulation, but as active assimilation of the Guru's philosophical teachings.

This deeply felt connection extendeds into the very form and content of Asan's works, making his literary output a mirror that reflected the Guru's mystical and ethical vision. Through this relationship, Asan internalised Guru's call for inner awakening as the precursor to societal reform, turning his poetry into a vehicle for appeal to human conscience, leading to ethical reformation.

4.4.3 Advaita, Social Equality, and Spiritual Liberation

The philosophical kinship between Sree Narayana Guru and Kumaran Asan is evident in their shared commitment to non-dualism (Advaita), ethical reform, and inner liberation. While Guru's poetic and philosophical voice was shaped by classical Advaitic thought infused with mystic experience, Asan adopted this vision in an extensively narrative and emotionally expressive framework, crafting it into stories of human suffering and redemption.

Guru's foundational teaching of "One caste, one religion, one God for mankind" was not just a sociological proposition; it stemmed from his deep-rooted Advaitic realisation that all beings share the same essence. This metaphysical non-duality translated into a radical call for equality and justice is what Asan internalised this

teaching and reflected in his poetry with emotional force and dramatic clarity.

In poems such as *Chandalabhikshuki* and *Duravastha*, Asan directly engages with the social hierarchies and indignities faced by women and lower castes. These themes, while grounded in lived realities, are elevated through the spiritual lens inherited from the Guru. The suffering portrayed in these poems becomes not just mere social issues, but a violation of the essential unity of existence that the Guru's Advaita affirms.

Guru's influence is also palpable in Asan's treatment of death and impermanence. Asan's celebrated poem *Veena Poovu* is an elegy on a fallen flower, meditating on the transience of life and initiating a quest for meaning beyond the temporal. This philosophical tone closely echoes Guru's reflections in Atmopadesa Śatakam, where he writes:

"All things that move and change and fade, Are waves that rise and fall in mind. The changeless shines behind the play, Know That, and peace you'll surely find." (*Verse adapted from the theme of non-duality in Guru's work*)

Although Asan's poetic style includes more narrative details and emotive dialogues, the underlying worldview remains deeply influenced by the Guru's Advaitic mysticism. Asan adopts the Guru's vision of liberation not as a withdrawal from the world, but as a transformation of one's inner vision, which then reshapes social action.

4.4.4 Guru's Style and Themes in Asan's Poetry

Kumaran Asan's literary style reveals deep impressions of Sree Narayana Guru's poetic approach—particularly in the use of ethical themes, introspective tone, and philosophical restraint. While Asan's works exhibit greater narrative complexity, the structural and thematic echoes of the Guru's influence are clear in their shared literary ethos.

Guru's poetry, as seen in Atmopadesa Śatakam, is marked by brevity, symbolic depth, and philosophical introspection. For example, in Atmopadesa Śatakam, Verse 29, Guru writes:

"Pleasure and pain come and go,
Like clouds across the sky.
The sky remains untouched—
So too, the self within."

While Asan's tone is more emotive and narrative, his poems often reflect a similar tendency toward inward reflection. In *Veena Poovu*, for instance, Asan meditates on the impermanence of the flower's beauty, leading to philosophical insight about the vanity of external form and the search for inner truth. Though the style differs, the spirit of introspective inquiry is closely aligned with the Guru's teachings.

(Daivadasakam: Aavikkappaliyethiya Daivavum Vimochitharaya Janathayum, Dr Bineesh Puthuppanam)

It is noteworthy that Kumaranasan left the flower unnamed in Veena Poovu. To name a flower is to classify; it confines ideas within a single bloom. The nameless 'veena poova' represents a far larger idea and elevates Asan to greater conceptual heights. God has no religion; the awareness that the Self and the Other are one—that is God. This consciousness is contained in the opening invocation, **'ദൈവമേ...'**.

In works like *Chinthavishtayaya Seetha*, Asan explores moral anguish

and existential reflection, echoing Guru's insistence on ethical clarity and inner purity. The notion of detachment from fluctuating experiences and anchoring in the self resonate with both the poets.

Another reflection of the Guru's influence is seen in Asan's concern for language and its clarity. The Guru's poetic diction, as analysed by literary scholars, was chosen not for ornamentation, but for its ability to communicate spiritual insight with simplicity and elegance. Asan similarly avoids the elaborate Sanskritised diction typical of classical Malayalam poetry; instead adopts a more direct, lucid style suited to convey philosophical and social themes.

Furthermore, Guru's ideas—such as the dignity of human beings, the call for universal love, and the denunciation of caste—are found throughout Asan's body of his creative works. For instance, Asan's *Chandalabhikshuki* is not merely a social critique, but a poetic meditation on human worth, much like Guru's own commitment to visualise the divine in all beings.

While Asan developed his own poetic voice, he confined it so within a moral and spiritual framework shaped decisively by the Guru's teachings. The philosophical foundation, the ethical drive, and the concern for human dignity that define Asan's poetry can be traced back to the Guru's mystic vision and literary discipline.

Recap

1. Asan: born 1873, disciple of Guru
2. Poetic avant-garde in Malayalam
3. Guru's "all as kin" philosophy
4. *Pushpavādi*: poem of prayer
5. *Jīvakāruṇyapañcakam*: compassion theme
6. Advaitic non-duality in Asan's imagery
7. Ethical reform via verse
8. Blend of devotion and social critique
9. Use of nature metaphors
10. Universal human dignity
11. Mentor's guidance in ethical writing
12. Integration of Bhakti and Jnana
13. Asan's narrative elegance

14. Philosophical depth from Guru
15. Synthesis of local and universal
16. Poetic response to caste injustice
17. Innovative metre and style
18. Fusion of mysticism and realism
19. Role in Kerala's renaissance
20. Literary patronage by Guru
21. Asan's sermons in verse
22. Emphasis on inner transformation
23. Social upliftment through poetry
24. Legacy in modern Malayalam
25. Enduring mentor-disciple bond

Objective Questions

1. Which is the Year of Asan's birth?
2. Which is Asan's poem of compassion?
3. What does Guru's slogan mean?
4. Which is Asan's devotional narrative?
5. What does the fusion of Bhakti and Jnana yield?
6. Accoring to Guru, what is mentor-disciple relationship?
7. What is the Poetic style marked by?
8. What is the Ethical reform term used?
9. Where is Asan's influential territory?
10. What was the Literary movement shaped?

Answers

1. 1873
2. Jīvakāruṇya
3. Kinship
4. Pushpavādi
5. Synthesis
6. Central
7. Elegance
8. Service
9. Kerala
10. Modernism

Assignments

1. Analyse Guru's impact on Asan's *Pushpavādi*.
2. Discuss the interplay of non-duality and compassion in Asan's verse.
3. Evaluate the mentor-disciple model in shaping Kerala's literary modernism.
4. Compare Asan's nature imagery with Guru's metaphors.
5. Assess how Asan's poetry advanced social reform ideals.

SGOU

Imagery, Metre & Rhythm in Guru's Poetry

SGOU

UNIT

Figurative Language and Poetry

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- identify the different kinds of figurative language that Narayana Guru uses in his poetry
- explain how metaphor, allegory and symbolism deepen the poems' spiritual-social themes
- locate and interpret key illustrative passages from Guru's major works
- compare the Guru's figurative technique with that of earlier Indian poet-seers

Prerequisites

Figurative language serves as the vibrant heartbeat of poetry, transcending the mere denotation of words to evoke profound emotional and intellectual responses. It is through metaphor, simile, personification, and other such devices that poets infuse their verses with layers of meaning, transforming ordinary language into an art form.This deliberate departure from literal expression invites readers into a richer interpretative experience, allowing them to perceive the world in novel and often startling ways. For the uninitiated, poetry might seem obscure, yet it is precisely this artful use of figurative language that unlocks its deeper truths and universal human experiences.

The power of figurative language in poetry is intrinsically linked to its ability to create vivid imagery and sensory details. By drawing unexpected connections between seemingly dissimilar concepts, poets stimulate the imagination, painting

mental pictures that resonate long after the words are read. This imaginative engagement is crucial, as it fosters a more profound understanding and appreciation of the poem's themes. Without figurative flourishes, poetry would risk becoming didactic or simplistic, failing to capture the nuances of human emotion and the complexities of existence. It is the very essence of poetic expression, transforming the mundane into the magical.

Furthermore, the strategic deployment of figurative language is deeply intertwined with the aesthetic principles that govern the creation and reception of poetic works. Across various traditions, particularly in the richness of Eastern thought, the concept of evoking specific emotional states or 'flavours' in the audience has been paramount. This ancient wisdom recognizes that effective poetry goes beyond mere description; it aims to stir the soul, to elicit a range of sentiments that resonate with the human condition. The skillful use of metaphor and other tropes becomes the conduit through which these desired emotional responses are meticulously crafted and delivered, ensuring lasting impact of the poem.

Thus the unit that follows examines figurative language not as ornament but as technology: a means to unveil reality, quicken compassion and dismantle injustice. We will read selected stanzas of Sreenarayana Guru, scan their imagery, and ask how sound, symbol and silence collaborate in the mind of a listener who may never have opened a Sanskrit manual yet feels the truth when a lamp with five wicks suddenly flares inside the heart.

Key themes

Metaphor, Allegory, Symbolism, Alaṅkāra, Darśanam, Compassion, Social-reform

Discussion

5.1.1 Figurative Language

Poetry, at it is heart, is far more than just words on a page; it's a potent form of communication that moves, inspires, and transforms. This profound impact is largely due to the masterful deployment of figurative language, which acts as the very lifeblood of verse. Through metaphor, simile, personification, and a host of other literary devices, poets transcend the literal, inviting us into a richer, more nuanced understanding of the world. This deliberate artistry allows poetry to convey deep emotional and intellectual truths, making the familiar feel fresh and the complex accessible.

Across India's classical traditions, the poet (kavi) was often seen as a seer (ṛṣi), someone whose vision preceded their words. This ancient wisdom, which

emphasizes that true artistry lies not just in *what* is said but *how* it's said, profoundly influenced figures like Sree Narayana Guru. In late 19th-century Kerala, a society deeply segmented by caste and access to learning, Guru wielded figurative language as a powerful, democratic bridge. By using arresting images instead of scholastic jargon, he brought profound concepts of Advaita, ethics, and social reform to ordinary Malayalis in their fields, ferries, and classrooms.

From his early devotional hymns, which glittered with wordplay and phonetic echoes, to the mature concision of works like *Atmopadesa Śatakam*, Guru's command of figurative language was exceptional. He could distill vast metaphysical doctrines and ethical instructions into a single, homely image, a seed, a lamp, an ocean, allowing readers to grasp complex ideas on multiple levels. His poetic choices were never mere flourish; they were carefully timed to digintegrity and foster deep recognition, enabling his profound insights to resonate deeply and endure through generations.

In the richness of Indian tradition, the kavi (poet) is revered as a ṛṣi (seer), embodying the maxim that one who is not a seer cannot be a poet. This profound connection aligns poetry with darśana, the unveiling of reality, where creativity (pratibhā) is understood as intuitive knowledge from which diction naturally flows. Ancient texts, from the Ṛig Veda to Yāska's Nirukta, often use these terms interchangeably, with works like Bhaṭṭa Tauta's Kāvya-Kautukam emphasizing poetry's revelatory power over mere embellishment. This foundational principle underscores the idea that for the Poet as Seer, vision must always precede expression.

Sree Narayana Guru's poetic journey beautifully exemplifies this fusion of vision and craft. His early devotional phase, characterized by hymns like *Śaṇmukha Daśakam* and *Subrahmaṇya Kīrthanam*, shows a youthful exuberance, brimming with sound-colour and occasional playful word-craft. While reflecting the sagunopāsanā mood of nascent bhakti, these pieces already showcased an effortless blend of expression and profound meaning, like a mountain stream searching for its clear channel. With maturity, Guru's verse evolved into lucid and concise expressions. In AtmopadesaŚatakam, he masterfully uses homely Malayalam to convey complex philosophical concepts, comparing the unmanifest to a simple seed (*karu*). This deliberate simplicity, where poetic joy (*ānanda*) converges with the tranquil śānta rasa of realisation, reflects his instruction to disciples like Kumaran Asan to prioritize philosophical substance over decorative flourish.

Guru's genius also lay in his ability to recast classical images, breathing new life into ancient wisdom. A prime example is his adaptation of the KaṭhaUpaniṣad's chariot allegory in AtmopadesaŚatakam. Here, verses 69-70 transform the ego into a mere statue guided by the senses, subtly shifting the focus from external control to non-dual insight. By integrating the rider, horses, and road into a single consciousness, Guru guides the reader towards integral realisation. Scholars like Dr. T. Bhaskaran rightly term his work 'decorated philosophy,' and Nitya Chaitanya Yati emphasizes that texts like AtmopadesaŚatakam draw authority solely from the poet's own experience. These critical voices consistently reinforce the core axiom: for Guru, poetry is revelation set to rhythm.

Dr. Sukumar Azhikode's assessment that Guru's early hymns, 'lacking complete experiential richness,' often 'got

carried away by the net of sounds,' and that 'lack of inner experience is always the reason for external sound exuberance,' offers a fascinating critical lens. While acknowledging the 'sound-rich hymns' praising various deities as representative of Guru's 'adolescent stage of spiritual practice,' Azhikode suggests that certain 'sound-based frivolities' disfigured the Swami's otherwise 'simple and pleasant poetic expression.' He even implies that any disagreement with this view is merely 'proof of devotion subjugating critical intellect.' This strong stance highlights a tension between poetic ornamentation and spiritual depth, suggesting that excessive focus on sound might, at times, detract from profound meaning.

However, a closer examination reveals that for Sree Narayana Guru, poetry transcends mere aesthetic play; it is a profound vehicle for spiritual revelation. As many scholars attest, Guru's work embodies the ancient Indian understanding of the poet as a 'ṛṣi' (seer), where 'darśana' (unveiling of reality) precedes poetic utterance. This core axiom suggests that Guru's verses aren't just beautifully crafted lines, but rather insights given form through rhythm and language. The very act of composing, for Guru, was an act of realising and then articulating deeper truths, making the poetic process an extension of his spiritual journey.

Indeed, while Guru's early poems might exhibit a certain youthful exuberance in their sound play, this doesn't necessarily indicate a lack of 'inner experience.' Instead, it could be seen as an exploration of the myriad ways in which language can serve as a conduit for the ineffable. The musicality and rhythmic precision in his hymns often served a devotional purpose, aiding memorization and fostering a meditative state. For Guru, the 'net of sounds' was not a distraction but a deliberate choice to make complex philosophical and spiritual concepts accessible and engaging, especially to a wider audience in a time when learning was segmented.

Therefore, the critical voices, despite their differing interpretations of Guru's early style, ultimately converge on the understanding that for him, 'poetry is revelation set to rhythm.' Whether through the intricate soundscapes of his early hymns or the profound simplicity of his mature works, Guru consistently used poetic form to encapsulate and convey spiritual truths. His literary legacy is a testament to the idea that true poetic artistry lies in its capacity to unveil reality, making profound insights accessible and deeply resonant, not merely in what is said, but how it is said, imbued with the rhythm of revelation itself.

5.1.2 Types of Figurative Language in Guru's Poetry

Having seen how vision grounds poetic expression, we now turn to the specific imaginative tools Guru employs. His figures of speech fall into three broad clusters: *alaṅkāra* (ornament), sustained metaphor/allegory, and symbolism.

5.1.2.1 Alaṅkāra, Figures of Sound and Sense

Ornamentation (Alaṅkāra) in Poetry

As Dr. Geetha Suraj explains in 'Sree Narayana Guruvinte Stothrangal Oru Padanam' (Chapter 14, 'The Radiance of Poetry,' pages 235-240), alaṅkāra (ornamentation) is a device poets use to manifest poetic beauty. Just as natural beauty is enhanced by appropriate jewelry, a discerning poet employs suitable ornaments to elevate a poem's charm. Indian poetic thought grants significant

importance to *alaṅkāra*, asserting that even an attractive face lacks luster without adornment. Ornaments are broadly categorized into *śabdālaṅkārās* (sound-based ornaments) and *arthālaṅkārās* (meaning-based ornaments). *Śabdālaṅkāra* enhances the poem through sound arrangements, while *arthālaṅkāra* enriches it through meaning, a convenient distinction for analytical purposes.

Guru's poetry generally places less emphasis on *arthālaṅkārās*. Instead, most of his works, particularly his hymns (*stōtrams*), are rich in śabdasaundaryam (sound beauty). Guru employs ornamentation only where it intensifies the poem's aesthetic appeal. Dr. Geetha Suraj notes, 'Any uniqueness that can be brought into poetry through sound arrangement falls under *śabdālaṅkāra*.' For Guru, who possessed a vast vocabulary, sound arrangement posed no challenge. The interesting nature of this sound arrangement contributes to the musicality in Guru's poems. He extensively utilized major *śabdālaṅkārās* such as dvitīyākṣaraprāsam (alliteration on the second syllable), anuprāsam (alliteration/ assonance), antādiprāsam (chaining of verses), and yamakam (repetition of words with different meanings) in his works. The sweetness of sound generated by the repetitive use of similar letters forms the basis of *śabdālaṅkāra.* Even in silent reading, *śabdālaṅkāra* can evoke a sense of rhythm. In stōtrams, *śabdālaṅkārās* hold particular significance; sound arrangements like prāsam aid in memorization and recitation, and the repetition of sounds can help focus the mind.

5.1.3 Guru's Poetic Craft and Scholar Perspectives

Sree Narayana Guru's compositions are consistently imbued with prāsa-bhaṅgi (rhyme beauty). Sukumar Azhikode, highlighting that *stōtrams* constitute the primary phase of Guru's compositions, states: 'The sound-rich hymns praising Shiva, Subrahmanya, Ganapathi, and Kali represent the adolescent stage of Guru's spiritual practice.' He further notes in 'Narayana Guru Samāhāra Grantham': 'In this stage, lacking complete experiential richness, the Acharya often got carried away by the net of sounds. The sound-based nonsenses of immature child-poets can be seen abundantly in many works from his *Avadhoota* period. Lack of inner experience is always the reason for external sound exuberance.' Azhikode cites *Ṣaṇmukha Stōtram*, written in alphabetical order, and *Navamañjari* (which begins with 'Narayana kr̥tamanjari' in each verse) as examples, asserting that any opinion claiming this tendency. disfigures the Swami's simple and pleasant poetic expression is merely proof of devotion subjugating critical intellect.

However, Guru's poetry truly shines with intense experiential depth in his *stōtrams*. It is in these hymns that his poetic genius, rather than his philosophical works, is most evident. The assertion that Guru compensated for a lack of experience with *śabdālaṅkāra* is not entirely accurate. Guru's stōtrams are profoundly experiential songs of self-realisation. Any other sound extravagance Guru employed in *stōtrams* was precisely because they are hymns. *Stōtrams* are meant more for chanting and recitation than merely for reading enjoyment. For ease of memorization, *stōtrams* have traditionally incorporated various sound arrangements since ancient times, a practice followed by poets like Ezhuthachan and Poonthanam. Guru merely continued this tradition. Furthermore, Guru's never aimed to display his prowess as a poet.

5.1.4 Metaphor and Conscience

Sree Narayana Guru's poetic figures often transcend mere description, serving as potent catalysts to prod readers toward compassionate action. This ethical dimension is perhaps nowhere clearer than in JeevakaruṇyaPañcakam. Here, the seemingly straightforward declaration, 'Eating meat is sin' (മാംസം ഭക്ഷിക്കുന്നത് പാപമാണ്) is far more than a simple dietary prohibition. Instead, it functions as a profound moral metaphor. In this context, 'flesh' (മാംസം) becomes synonymous with 'violence' (അക്രമം) while 'abstention' (ത്യാഗം) represents 'universal love' (വിശ്വ പ്രേമം). This powerful metaphor directly links an outward act, the consumption of meat, to an inward state of being: the principle of non-injury (ahiṁsā). By drawing this implicit connection, Guru artfully invites the reader to introspect and measure their own capacity for empathy, fostering a spontaneous ethical awakening without resorting to overt sermonizing or didactic pronouncements. The subtlety of this approach allows for a personal and profound realisation of one's responsibility towards all living beings.

5.1.5 Social Reform: Figurative Satire and Symbolic Subversion

Beyond ethical exhortation, Guru ingeniously wielded imagery to unmask injustice as deftly as he unveiled spiritual truth. In his discourses,the famous comparison of caste pride to 'breathing through only one nostril' (ഒരുനാസാദ്വാരത്തിലൂടെമാത്രംശ്വാസമെടുക്കുന്നത് പോലെ) attracted much critical attention those times.This seemingly comic yet, surgically precise image brilliantly expose the inherent absurdity and debilitating nature of those in the privileged social division. It highlights how caste, by limiting human potential and connection, essentially diminishes one's very breath, vitality, and wholeness. The impact of such a vivid and relatable image far surpasses any lengthy philosophical argument against casteism. This figurative satire works by making the listener internally perceive the irrationality and self-inflicted harm of caste-based discrimination. Furthermore, in JātiNirṇayam, Guru sharpens this point with the stark, unforgettable imperative: 'Ask not, say not, think not caste' (ജാതി ചോദിക്കരുത്, പറയരുത്, ചിന്തിക്കരുത്). This single command, delivered with the rhythmic force of a mantra, acts as a symbolic subversion, designed to dismantle centuries of entrenched hierarchy and prejudice, striking at the very root of caste consciousness.

5.1.6 Universalism: One Image, Many Tongues

The universality of Guru's vision is beautifully mirrored in the expansive reach of his metaphors, which travel freely between Malayalam, Sanskrit, and Tamil. This linguistic fluidity in his symbolic language reinforces his foundational axiom: 'One caste, one religion, one God for man' (ഒരുജാതി, ഒരുമതം, ഒരുദൈവം മനുഷ്യന്). Whether it's the 'karu' (seed) in Malayalam symbolising the unmanifest potential, the image of a rising Kundalini serpent in a Tamil hymn representing spiritual energy, or the Sanskritic 'bhānuman' (sun-self) radiating self-effulgent awareness, all these diverse poetic symbols converge to articulate the same profound non-dual insight. This demonstrates Guru's mastery in showing how poetic symbols can effortlessly cross linguistic fences, much like waves, despite their individual forms and movements fundamentally belong to, and arise from the same boundless ocean. His use of multi-lingual imagery thus becomes a testament to the essential unity underlying diverse expressions,

reflecting his core philosophical message of universal oneness.

5.1.7 Vedic Light-Imagery and Symbolic Consonance

Guru's poetry frequently draws upon Vedic light-imagery, celebrating truth (*ṛta)* and knowledge (*vidyā*) as shining forces, echoing the ancient prayer, 'tamasomājyotirgamaya' (lead us from darkness to light). In *Atmopadesa Śatakam*, he powerfully invokes the inner sun-Self (bhānuman), describing it as 'one without a second, shining as the knower of all things,' thereby recasting the Upaniṣadic *jyotiṣmānātman* in vivid Malayalam. This isn't merely translation; it's a profound re-envisioning that makes abstract wisdom tangible. Another potent symbol is the rotating firebrand in verse 33, which likens the mind-whirled world to a swiftly spinning spark that appears as a circle. This illustrates how perception can create illusion, while the core 'fire' of reality remains unified. Here, light functions both as the revealer of truth and the truth itself, effectively collapsing the duality between observer and observed.

Beyond light, Guru also establishes a symbolic consonance of fire, ocean, and breath. Fire, for instance, primarily signifies knowing; the glow of an ember in *Atmopadesa Śatakam* transforms into an epistemological lesson, contrasting fleeting illusion with the steadfast flame of realisation. The ocean, another recurring motif, carries twin meanings. In the prayer *Daiva Daśakam*, Guru reveres the divine as 'ആഴമേറും നിൻമഹസ്സാം ആഴി' (the immeasurable ocean of your glory/mercy), yet in certain other contexts, the same vast sea represents *saṃsāra* (the cycle of birth and death,thus contingent or ever-changing). Through such paired symbols, Guru conveys that spiritual liberation or entanglement depends entirely on one's inner vision, rather than the external circumstances themselves, highlighting the subjective nature of perception.

5.1.8 Rhythm Echoing Mantra and Critical Expert Observations

The rhythm in Guru's poetry often echoes the rhythm of Vedic hymns, designed for chant and meditation. Just as ancient mantras steady memory and focus the mind, Guru's verses utilize classical metres that carry significant mnemonic weight. The deliberate phonemic repetition within his lines 'generates rhythm even in silent reading,' effectively aligning his poetics with the practice of *japa* (recitation of mantras). This masterful marriage between metre and evocative light-imagery transforms every stanza into an 'audible illumination,' allowing the spiritual insights to be absorbed not just intellectually, but also through an almost meditative sonic experience.

Scholarly observations consistently reinforce this profound fusion of imagery, rhythm, and insight in Guru's work. Dr. Geetha Suraj describes each *śloka* as a 'philosophical capsule,' emphasizing how the stylistic serenity deepens its meditative power, particularly evident in the tranquil verses of *Atmopadesa Śatakam* concerning ego and Maya. Dr. T. Bhaskaran labels Guru's work as 'decorated philosophy,' stressing that ornamentation invariably serves *darśana* (revelation) rather than obscuring it, citing the firebrand image as both a sonic ornament and an Advaitic lesson. Dr. K. Muthulakshmi defines *Darshanam* as 'symbolic epistemology,' using light metaphors to probe the very nature of knowing, highlighted by the recurrent triad of light, perception, and clarity. Udayakumar notes Guru's unique blend of 'folk realism with Vedāntic

abstraction,' making his profound philosophy accessible through simple, relatable images. These critical voices unanimously affirm that in Guru's poetry, imagery, rhythm, and insight seamlessly intertwine, rendering the poetic ornament transparent and allowing the reader to apprehend the same inner radiance that the poet describes.

5.1.9 Poetic Crystallization of Ethos and Upaniṣadic Brevity

Guru's poetic lines possess an extraordinary ability to crystallize his profound ethos, compressing vast spiritual truths into concise, impactful expressions. For instance, the line

'ആനന്ദക്കടൽപൊങ്ങി-
ത്താനേപായുന്നിതാപരന്നൊരുപോൽ'

(The ocean of bliss wells up and flows by itself, pervasive everywhere) from Anandalahariencapsulates the boundless nature of Advaitic bliss. Similarly, Advaitadīpikā interweaves the states of dream and waking:

പേരായിരം പ്രതിഭയായിരമിങ്ങവറ്റി-
ലാരാലെഴുംവിഷയമായിരമാം പ്രപഞ്ചം,
ഓരായ്കിൽ നേരിതു കിനാവുണരുംവരെയ്ക്കും
നേരാമുണർന്നളവുണർന്നവനാമശേഷം.

(The thousand names appear as reflections, and from them arise the objects... This is true, and when one awakens, one is entirely awakened). The simple yet profound 'ആഴമേറും നിൻ മഹസ്സാം ആഴി' (the ocean of your immeasurable glory/mercy) from Daiva Daśakam exemplifies his ability to extract Vedic luminosity into intimate speech. These verses collectively demonstrate Guru's firm belief that the true poet is first a seer, capable of translating profound spiritual insights into relatable, rhythmic language.

Guru inherited and perfected the Upaniṣadic tradition of brevity, where metaphysics are condensed into compact, profound images. Every verse of *Atmopadesa Śatakam* exemplifies this density, functioning as a 'philosophical aphorism' that, despite sparse ornamentation, is laden with contemplative force. Verse 1, the human being is born from a mother established in compassion, in a single stroke, evokes biological birth, frames compassion (karuṇā) as the cosmic matrix, and encapsulates the Vedāntic truth that all life originates from a single, merciful source. Such minimalism echoes the Upaniṣadic metaphors of birds-on-a-tree or clay-and-pot, inviting deep, silent reflection rather than extensive philosophical discourse, urging the reader towards intuitive understanding.

5.1.10 Folk Realism, Vedāntic Abstraction, and Multilingual Synthesis

The Critic Udayakumar highlights Guru's remarkable knack for blending 'folk realism with Vedāntic abstraction,' creating a unique fusion where simple, everyday images, a cow, an ant, a steamship, carry immense cosmic freight. This approach makes profound philosophical concepts accessible and relatable. In *Daiva Daśakam,* the child-friendly metaphor of 'ആവിവൻതോണി' (your boat) coexists beautifully with the majestic line 'ആഴമേറുംനിൻമഹസ്സാം ആഴി' (the ocean of your immeasurable glory). This demonstrates Guru's singular poetic voice, capable of speaking to both the everyday concerns of the common household and the grand contemplation of the cosmos, seamlessly bridging the gap between the mundane and the metaphysical. Ultimately, Guru's diction represents a masterful multilingual, multisymbolic synthesis. The clarity

with which his metaphors surface in Malayalam, Sanskrit, and Tamil reflects and reinforces his core slogan, 'One caste, one religion, one God for man.'Images of seed, lamp, fire, ocean, and serpent migrate effortlessly across these languages, yet consistently point to the same non-dual center. This linguistic fluidity transforms language itself into a powerful lesson in unity, embodying his philosophical message. As seen in *Kundalinippāṭṭu*: ചൊല്ലെല്ലാമുണ്ടുചുടരായെഴുംപൊരു-ളെല്ലയിലേറിനിന്നാടുപാമ്പേ' (*All words are there, climb onto the boundary of the meaning that shines, O serpent, and dance!).* Here, the swirling consonants mimic the serpent they describe, proving that regardless of its source in, Upaniṣad, Bhakti hymn, Buddhist tale, or village idiom, are all forged into a singular, luminous alloy of sound, symbol, and profound insight by the Guru.

5.1.11 Thematic Functions of Figurative Language in Guru's Poetry

Sree Narayana Guru's figures of speech are never mere embellishments or ornamental digressions; they are integral to the very purpose and profound meaning of his poems. Within his work, four intertwined functions of figurative language stand out, each serving to deepen understanding and inspire action.

5.1.11.1 Parables and Analogical Language

Guru frequently employs parables and analogical language as a primary pedagogical method, condensing complex doctrines into relatable, everyday scenes. This approach allows readers to 'see the truth' intuitively, rather than being subjected to dry, abstract lectures. Instead of dictating conclusions, these brief stories or comparisons appeal directly to shared human experience, inviting personal reflection and deeper understanding.

Some key examples of his effective parables and analogies include:

- Dark-room dialogue: In *Atmopadesa Satakam* (verse 10), Guru presents a scenario where two individuals in pitch darkness both declare, 'I am.' This simple mini-narrative instantly conveys that the 'I' transcends the physical body and its transient traits, pointing directly to the universal Self that underlies all individual existence.
- Boat on the ocean (modern steamship): In *Daiva Daśakam*, Guru employs the analogy of human life as a perilous voyage across the ocean. The Divine then emerges as the pilot (ആവിവൻതോണി), steering the vessel through challenges. This analogy powerfully conveys the need for divine guidance and surrender in navigating life's uncertainties.
- Common birth of all humans: Guru frequently emphasized the biological unity of all human beings, stating that all are born in the same way. This fundamental observation, often presented as a straightforward fact, served as a potent analogy to undermine artificial caste distinctions, appealing to an undeniable shared experience rather than engaging in theoretical debates.

These analogies bypass rigid doctrinal debates, instead of appealing to the universal, shared human experiences. They do not dictate conclusions but rather invite individual reflection, fostering a more profound and personal engagement with Guru's spiritual and social philosophies.

Recap

- Poet as seer precedes poet as craftsman
- Figurative speech = revelation set to rhythm
- Early hymns: sonic brilliance, devotional zeal
- dvitīyākṣara-prāsa and anuprāsa examples
- Overplay of alphabetical acrostic in youth
- Maturity: diction shaped by realised vision
- Images pared to one per verse, dense meaning
- Seed (karu) metaphor for unmanifest Self
- Lamp with five wicks ↔ sense-fuel illusion
- Rope–snake allegory of māyā
- Ocean–wave motif = non-duality of jīva/Brahman
- Chariot recast from KaṭhaUpaniṣad
- Figures drawn from farming, craft, voyage
- Serpent (kundalinī) coils in sound and sense
- Imagery travels Malayalam-Tamil-Sanskrit
- Ethical prod: 'Eating meat is sin' metaphor
- Satire: caste pride likened to one-nostril breath
- Universalism: one image, many tongues
- Critics label style 'decorated philosophy'
- Ornament transparent to insight
- No wasted repetition, functional echoes only
- Sound, symbol, silence collaborate
- Images guide from surface to insight
- Figurative language as democratic pedagogy
- Vision, craft and social conscience fused

Objective Questions

1. Which Upaniṣad supplies the original chariot allegory adapted by Guru?
2. What Malayalam word does the Guru use for the seed image?
3. Name the stanza collection that declares ‘Eating meat is sin.’
4. Which poetic figure involves second-syllable rhyme?
5. Give one creature symbolising kundalinī energy.
6. What is the key rasa that marks Guru’s mature verse?
7. Which sense-figure compares rope and snake?
8. Identify one critic who calls the work ‘decorated philosophy.’
9. Which body of water symbolises both mercy and saṃsāra?
10. What slogan condenses the Guru’s social universalism?

Answers

1. KaṭhaUpaniṣad
2. karu
3. JeevakaruṇyaPañcakam
4. dvitīyākṣara-prāsa
5. Serpent
6. Śānta rasa
7. Allegory (rope–snake)
8. Dr T. Bhaskaran
9. Ocean
10. ‘One caste, one religion, one God for man’

Assignments

1. Analyse how a single metaphor in AtmopadesaŚatakam integrates metaphysics, ethics and pedagogy.
2. Discuss the evolution of Narayana Guru's figurative style from early devotional exuberance to contemplative clarity.
3. Compare Guru's use of allegory with that of a classical Sanskrit poet of your choice.
4. Evaluate the social impact of figurative satire in poems such as JātiNirṇayam.
5. 'Sound, symbol and silence collaborate in Guru's verse.' Illustrate with close reading of two stanzas.
6. How does multilingual imagery advance the Guru's universalist programme?

SGOU

UNIT 2

Similes and Metaphors in Guru's Poetry

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- differentiate simile and metaphor in the Guru's corpus with textual evidence
- trace recurring imagery such as light, ocean, mirror and spider-web and their layered meanings
- explain how comparison clarifies Advaita, ethics and social reform for a popular audience
- assess the pedagogic shift from simile 'bridge' to metaphor 'fusion' inside representative poems

Prerequisites

Comparison, as Narayana Guru's poetic device, is not decorative; it is a vital instrument of insight. The Malayali reader in the late 19th century, whom he addressed was aware of the had heard printing-press debate, temple bells and steam-horns within the same canvas . To guide such an audience from sensory flux to non-dual stillness, the poet first shows a likeness (simile) then collapses it into its identity (metaphor). This double move repeats the classical Indian progression from sagunopāsanā to nirgunopāsanā: from the worship of the shaped, to the realisation of the formless.

A simile flags itself, 'like,' or'as.'to draw, for example, the picture of Clouds drifting across the sky illustrate transient emotions, while the sky itself is changeless, which signifies the Self. Because the likeness is quick and concrete, even a child

can grasp it easily. In verse-books, the Guru printed the sky-cloud stanza beside a woodcut drawing to aid village reciters. Once the mind is prepared, the poem drops the comparative marker: rope is snake until light reveals the rope; flame is Self while the five-wick senses make it flicker. This fusion strikes as an intuition, rather than a syllogism.

The choice of vehicles is pragmatic: A mirror placed on every scholar's table; a spider web wove under the eave; steam-launches plied by coastal lagoons;each object already belongs to the commoners' life, that the poem does not import any alien myth is yhe focus. At the same time, it re-whenches local scenery into philosophical parable. Readers thereby taste Advaita in the salt wind of their own backwaters.

Simile and metaphor also carry ethical voltage. When Daiva Daśakamcompares life's peril to an ocean voyage and begs the divine helmsman to steer, a symbol simultaneously dislodging the authority of caste 'lords,'which implies that only a universal navigator can pilot the contemporary humanity. Likewise the spider weaving and consuming its web illustrates the Brahman as both material and efficient cause at once warning against the greed that consumes its own creations.

This unit explores three key aspects of Sree Narayana Guru's comparative method. First, we will categorise Guru's central comparisons based on their doctrinal, ethical, and social functions. Next, we will examine the subtle structural shift from simile to metaphor within individual stanzas, observing how rhythm and alliteration facilitate this transition. Finally, we will consider the contemporary relevance of his approach: can a modern mobile-phone screen serve the same reflective purpose as the mirror of the 1890s? If so, Guru's method remains a valuable template: start with a familiar likeness, progress to a deeper, wordless identity, and allow insight to unfold naturally, without force.

Key themes

Simile, Metaphor, Mirror, Ocean, Rope-snake, Steam-launch, Pedagogy

Discussion

5.2.1 Comparison as a 'vital instrument of insight'

Simile (ഉപമ - Upama) in Malayalam Poetry

A simile is a figure of speech in poem that directly compares two different things using the words "like" (പോലെ - pole) or "as" (അതുപോലെ - athupole, കണക്കെ –kanakke meaning in the way how). The purpose is to make a description more vivid, imaginative, or emphatic. In Malayalam poetry, similes are a fundamental poetic device, enriching the imagery and emotional impact of the verses.

Sree Narayana Guru, masterfully employed various literary devices, including similes, to convey his deep spiritual and philosophical insights. While his poetry is primarily devotional and philosophical, he often used concrete imagery to explain abstract concepts, and similes were explored as the invaluable tool for this purpose.

For Narayana Guru, similes and metaphors are not ornaments but tools of illumination. They 'generate intricate spiritual, philosophical and ethical ideas into accessible poetic expressions,' grounding Advaita, yoga and social critique in familiar experience.

A simile compares two things with markers such as *like* / *as*; a metaphor fuses them without those markers, letting one reality speak through another. Guru wields both with 'meditative precision,' drawing images from nature (clouds, ocean, mirror), craft (spider-web), and contemporary life (steam-launch navigator) to bridge the seen and the unseen.

5.2.2 Similes – making the abstract understandable

5.2.2.1 Metaphor and Allegory, Pedagogical Images

Figurative Language: Arthālaṅkārās

In his poetic works, Sree Narayana Guru adeptly employed arthālaṅkārās (meaning-based ornaments) such as upamā (simile), rūpaka (metaphor), and rūpakātiśayōkti (extended metaphor). Similes are frequently used in his detailed descriptions of divine forms, from head to toe. Beyond this, Guru possessed a unique talent for rendering abstract concepts palpable through well-chosen similes. A particularly effective example from *Ṣaṇmukha Stōtram* is the comparison of Brahman's art of creation with a spider's weaving of its web, a concept rooted in Upaniṣadic thought:

ലൂതമുള്ളിലിരുന്ന നൂലു വലിച്ചുനൂത്തുകളിച്ചതും
സാദരം തനതുള്ളിലാക്കി രമിച്ചിടുംപടി മായയാ
ഭൂതഭൗതികമൊക്കെയും പതിവായെടുത്തുഭരിച്ചഴി-
ച്ചാദിമുച്ചുടരായ് വിളങ്ങുമനന്ത ഷൺമുഖ! പാഹിമാം.

(Ṣaṇmukha Stōtram)

This comparison of Brahman as both the efficient and material cause of the world, akin to a spider and its web, is highly appropriate. Guru also frequently used the simile of the ocean. In Daivadaśakam, the entire universe is said to reside in Shanmukha, just as the waves, the currents, and the ebb and flow are contained within the ocean. The profound beauty of the ocean simile is also evident when describing ourselves, Maya, God's glory, and God himself, using images like the ocean, the waves, the wind, and the depth. Comparing Maya to a 'killer elephant from the mountains' (മലമായയായ കൊലയാനപോലെ) effectively conveys its power and the difficulty in resisting it. Furthermore, similes such as 'like fragrance in a flower' (പൂവ്വിൽ മണം പോലെ) or 'like the sky reflected in the ocean' (സമുദ്രത്തിൽ പ്രതിഫലിക്കുന്ന ആകാശം പോലെ) make God's omnipresence a tangible experience.

Guru was equally adept at employing rūpakālaṅkārās (metaphors). In *Ṣaṇmukha Daśakam*, his depiction of devotion as a 'bean creeper' (പയർവള്ളിയായി) is remarkably beautiful. The prayer envisions the moon-like face raining down honeyed glances from lotus-like eyes, eradicating weeds of desire, and sowing the seed of divine grace to bring forth the bean-sprout of devotion. *Ṣaṇmukha Daśakam* is replete with metaphors, especially in its descriptions of yogic experiences. The fourth verse, for instance, intricately weaves a differents metaphors: the eight-

span spine as a road, the Kundalini Shakti as a vehicle, the Ida and Pingala nadis as twin horses, and the five senses, along with desires, anger, delusion, greed, and the eight limbs of yoga, as fives, sixes, and eights. The Sahasrara is portrayed as a palace, and the bliss of Brahman as milk to be heartily consumed, showcasing remarkable poetic artistry.

In *Janani Navaratnamañjari*, a virtuous sage (*suri*) is metaphorically a bee that finds joy in drinking nectar from the lotus of knowledge. The divine Mother, the embodiment of wisdom (*Vidyārūpiṇiyāya Janani*), conceals her true self with a playful curtain woven from the subtle threads of time, rendering her essence imperceptible. Some of Guru's rūpakātiśayōkti (extended metaphors) are profoundly complex in meaning, as exemplified by the twenty-fourth verse of *Śivaśatakam*:

മലയതിലുണ്ടു മരുന്നു മൂന്നു പാമ്പും
പുലിയുമതിന്നിരുപാടുമുണ്ടു കാവൽ
പുലയനെടുത്തു ഭുജിച്ചു പാതിയിന്നും
വിലസതി നീയുമെടുത്തുകൊൾക നെഞ്ചേ!

"On this hill
Rich with medicinal herbs
Guarded on either side, by three Cobras and a Tiger
The untouchable ate half the meal as usual
Enjoy the remains, my heart, happy as ever"

Here, the exact interpretations of these metaphors remain a subject of varied scholarly opinion. As observed in 'Sree Narayana Guruvinte Stothrangal Oru Padanam' by Dr. Geetha Suraj (Chapter 14, 'The Radiance of Poetry'), 'Regarding what these metaphors represent, scholars hold differing views.'

Guru's metaphors are terse teaching devices that condense Vedāntic insight:

Key Image	Concept Taught	Text / Line
Seed (karu)	Causality of the Self	*Atmopadesa Śatakam 1*
Lamp with five wicks	Senses and flickering ego	*Atmopadesa Śatakam 17*
Rope–snake / garland-snake	Illusory duality (maya)	*Atmopadesa Śatakam 20*
Ocean–wave	Non-duality of jīva and Brahman	recurring image, e.g. *Atmopadesa Śatakam 33*
Rotating firebrand	One appearing as many	*Atmopadesa Śatakam 33*

It is to be understood, as each metaphor is brief, there is little room for redundancy; the same idea is rarely restated in identical terms elsewhere. Guru's strategy is to place one vivid picture before the reader, and move on. Repetition, when it occurs, is functional (e.g., the ocean motif under different lights) rather than literal.

5.2.2.2 Symbolism, Images that Radiate Meaning

Symbolism in Guru's verse enlarges isolated metaphors into whole thought-clusters:

- Light = Knowledge / consciousness *(jyotirātmā)*. The 'inner lamp' glows steadily despite sensory gusts, echoing Upaniṣadic imagery.
- Ocean = Mercy (*Daiva Daśakam:* 'ആഴമേറുംനിൻമഹസ്സാംആഴി') or saṃsāra depending on context, showing that the same symbol can drown or deliver.
- Serpent (Kundalinī) = Ascending spiritual energy: 'ചൊല്ലെല്ലാമുണ്ടു ചുടരായെഴും...പാമ്പേ' coils through *Kundalinippāṭṭu*, mapping yoga onto a folk image.

As these symbols gather many nuances under one emblem, they prevent the text from restating ideas in prose. Instead of repeating doctrinal sentences, Guru lets the reader revisit the same symbol from new angles.

5.2.2.3 Definitions & scope

In classical poetics these belong to artha-alaṅkāras, sense-figures that clarify meaning. Guru's similes appear in early deity descriptions (*keśādi-pāda-varṇana*), in meditative aphorisms and in social prayer-songs, always chosen 'to root abstract thought in tangible experience.'

5.2.2.4 Key spiritual similes

Verse	Simile (original lines preserved)	Insight conveyed
Atmopadesa Śatakam 29	'Pleasure and pain come and go, / Like clouds across the sky. / The sky remains untouched, / So too, the Self within.'	Transience of emotion vs. changeless witness.
Atmopadesa Satakam 53	'Just as a mirror reflects forms, / The mind reflects the world outside. / When the mirror is clean and still, / Truth is clearly perceived within.'	Purified mind mirrors reality without distortion.
Daiva Daśakam	'Through the ocean of change and becoming, / Be Thou our Captain and guide.' (simile structure retained inside a larger metaphor)	Soul's dependence on divine helmsman amid life's flux

These comparisons 'never distract from meaning but gently illuminate it,' guiding the reader from everyday sight to the Vedāntic insight.

5.2.2.4 Social-ethical simile of the ocean

Across poems and prose exegesis the world is an 'ocean of saṃsāra':

'നമസ്തേമഹാഘോരസംസാരവാരാ-
ന്നിധിക്കക്കരെക്കേറുവാൻതൃപ്പദത്താ-'
(Kāḷināṭakam)

Guru links this image to Kerala's nineteenth-century caste turbulence, picturing divine 'steam-launch' feet ferrying the oppressed to shore. Here the simile unites mystical yearning with social protest.

5.2.3 Metaphors

5.2.3.1 Why Guru prefers metaphor to exposition

In the unit's overview of 'Metaphors in Guru's Poetry' we read that he 'encapsulates spiritual ideas and philosophical reflections in a concise and memorable form'. As a metaphor fuses two realities without the sign-posts *like* / *as*, it lets the abstract illuminate the concrete and vice-versa, turning each verse into a flash of direct recognition rather than a logical argument.

5.2.3.2 Core metaphors and the truths they unveil

Metaphoric image	Doctrine / function	Source in Unit 2
Light dispelling rope-snake illusion 'The snake is not there, only a rope… With light it vanishes, So does Māyā with knowledge.'	Ignorance → fear; knowledge → liberation	*Atmopadesa Śatakam* 17
Mirror-mind'Just as a mirror reflects forms, The mind reflects the world outside. When the mirror is clean and still, Truth is clearly perceived within.'	Purified mind reveals reality	*AtmopadesaSatakam* 53
Inner world → outer world 'The world that one perceives within, Will shape the world seen outside.'	Consciousness as cause of appearance	*AtmopadesaSatakam* 64
Ocean & navigator 'Through the ocean of change and becoming, Be Thou our Captain and guide.'	Saṃsāra's peril → need for divine guidance	*Daiva Daśakam*
Spider weaving its web 'ലൂതമുള്ളിലിരുന്നുലുവലിച്ചു …'	Brahman as material and efficient cause of cosmos	*Śaṇmukha-stotra*
Lamp with five wicks (flame flickers only by sensory fuel)	Five senses mask the steady Self-light	Unit discussion of *AtmopadesaSatakam* 17
Rotating firebrand (one spark seems a circle)	One reality mis-perceived as many	Unit note on *AtmopadesaSatakam* 33
Wave–ocean (wave rises and falls in same water)	Jīva–Brahman non-duality	Unit synthesis

These metaphors work simultaneously on literal, symbolic and Advaitic levels, giving each verse 'multi-dimensional pedagogic force'.

5.2.3.3 Yogic and Visionary metaphor - clusters

Guru's yogic hymns knit several images into a travelling tableau:

Spine as road, kuṇḍalinī as chariot, iḍā-piṅgalānāḍis as horses, obstacles as bandits, sahasrāra as royal palace, brahmānanda as nourishing milk. By threading these comparisons into one continuum he turns complex haṭha-yoga physiology into an almost cinematic pilgrimage from the base to the crown.

5.2.3.4 Modern social metaphors

In *Daiva Daśakam* the 'steam-launch feet' (āvikkappal) update the old *boat-across-saṃsāra* trope with colonial-era technology, making the divine navigator feel contemporary to readers accustomed to motor-boats and ocean trade. The same poem rejects earthly *thampurāns* (lords), declaring: 'You alone, O God,

are our lord; no one else.' The metaphor transfers sovereignty from caste enforcing overlords to a universal divine, thus combining mysticism with social protest.

5.2.3.5 Layering and extension

Many images start as simile and evolve into sustained metaphor. The mirror in verse 53, for instance, begins with 'just as' but by the final line *mind = mirror* is stated without any comparative marker; the figure 'ripens' into an ontology. Similarly the ocean metaphor widens from an image of peril to a symbol of divine omnipresence (Śaṇmukha as sea, 'fragrance in a flower… sky in the sea').

5.2.3.6 Stylistic hallmarks

1. Economy, one metaphor per verse is usual; repetition is rare and always functional.

2. Triply coded, physical picture, ethical cue, metaphysical pointer.

3. Multilingual reach, the same image travels through Malayalam, Sanskrit, Tamil, reinforcing Guru's message of unity.

5.2.4 How Simile and Metaphor Interlock

5.2.4.1 One vehicle, two functions

Guru 'often launches with a simile to invite understanding and then seals the insight by collapsing the comparison into metaphor.' The *mirror* passage we can observe is the paradigm:

- Simile phase – '*Just* as a mirror reflects forms…' (verse 53)
- Metaphor phase – 'When the mirror is clean… Truth is perceived *within*.'

The external comparison dissolves; mind and mirror are now proclaimed identical.

5.2.4.2 Progression inside a single poem

In *Daiva Daśakam* the voyage across the ocean of becoming begins as a simile, life *like* a sea. Two lines later the ocean enlarges into an all-encompassing metaphor: the Divine is 'the ocean of Your immeasurable glory.' The same image thus shifts from peril (world-sea) to the eternal presence (God-sea), demonstrating the fluid slide from simile to metaphor within eight short lines.

5.2.4.3 Pedagogical bridge

The unit emphasises that simile performs a bridging role: 'a quick flash of likeness' that readies the mind for the deeper fusion of metaphor. Once the reader grasps the likeness, the poem can dispense with comparative markers and speak in the idiom of identity, Advaita rendered audible.

5.2.4.4 Critical testimony

Dr T. Bhaskaran calls this sliding scale 'decorated philosophy': ornament (simile) that leads straight into ontological statement (metaphor) without breaking the meditative thread. Geetha Suraj adds that the method 'protects śānta-rasa' because the mind is never left juggling mere word-play; every comparison lands in reflective stillness.

5.2.5 Structural Placement of Comparison in Guru's Verse

5.2.5.1 Opening, pivot, close

A survey table in the unit charts where comparisons occur inside a stanza:

Position	Typical device	Purpose	Verse sample
Opening line	Bright simile	Quick hook into theme	Cloud-sky in Atmopadesa Satakam 29
Mid-pivot	Extended metaphor	Deepens or overturns initial image	Rope-snake in Atmopadesa Satakam 17
Final couplet	Image-free aphorism	States doctrine baldly once picture has done its work	'Know this and be free.'Atmopadesa Satakam 33

The architecture lets poetry move from picture to principle with no jarring step.

5.2.5.2 Sound-sense fusion

Because comparisons often coincide with dvitīyākṣara-prāsa or anuprāsa, their sonic charm reinforces semantic clarity. The mirror-mind verse repeats ma/mi sounds, 'smoothening the cognitive shift from object to subject.'

5.2.5.3 Multilingual resonance

The same structural rhythm surfaces in Malayalam, Sanskrit, and Tamil compositions, illustrating the unit's claim that Guru's figurative method is 'form-agnostic yet function-exact.'

5.2.6 Synthesis and Closing Perspective

Simile and metaphor in Guru's poetry work in tandem:

- Simile – opens the gate with everyday likeness.
- Metaphor – walks the reader through, to identity and non-duality.
- Aphorism – leaves the mind in unadorned awareness.

As each image is economical and purpose-laden, the poems avoid repetition, fulfil doctrinal clarity, and serve ethical and social awakening, all within a compact verbal frame. The unit concludes that Guru's mastery of comparison 'fashions a democratic poetics where the farm-hand and the philosopher meet in the same flash of recognition.'

5.2.7 Comparative devices as illumination

1. Bridge of simile : Pleasure and pain, like clouds across the sky – a quick visual that introduces the permanence of the witnessing Self.
2. Instant shift of metaphor: 'The snake is not there, only a rope… With light it vanishes.' No marker like/as is needed; ignorance collapses into knowledge in a single flash.
3. Everyday provenance: Boats, mirrors, clouds, spider-webs keep Advaita accessible across caste, class, and learning.
4. Triple payload: One figure usually delivers spiritual clarity, ethical stirring, and social critique together. The steam-launch rescues souls, pricks conscience, and challenges caste hierarchy in the same breath.

Closing Perspective

- Similes demystify doctrine with familiar likenesses, cloud-sky, mirror-mind, rope-snake etc.

- Metaphors radicalise devotion and reform by renewing classic images with modern symbols as in, steam power steering through the sea of oppression'.

- Each comparison is economical: one clear image per verse, no needless repetition;precision is typical of artha-alaṅkāra.

Through this fusion of vision and economy, comparison itself becomes a democratic channel of illumination, enabling every reader, whether scholar or labourer, to glimpse the same unifying truth.

As critics note, this is 'decorated philosophy': every ornament serves darśanam, not display. The true achievement of Guru's poetry is therefore neither metre nor metaphor alone, but the way how both become vehicles of vision, carrying illumination to any reader willing to reach listen.

Glossary of Technical Terms

Term	Concise definition in the unit
Alaṅkāra	Figure of speech or poetic ornament, divided into *śabda-alaṅkāra* (sound-figure) and *artha-alaṅkāra* (sense-figure).
Anuprāsa	Alliteration; repetition of the same consonant or group of consonants to weave a sonic chain.
Dvitīyākṣara-prāsa	Rhyme on the second syllable of successive words or lines, a favourite device in Guru's early stotras.
Karu	'Seed'/embryo; Guru's recurring metaphor for the unmanifest Self that gives rise to all forms.
Māyā	Illusory appearance that veils non-dual reality, dramatised through rope-snake and firebrand images.
Śabda-rasa	The aesthetic relish (*rasa*) born purely of sound, distinguished from meaning-based relish.
Śānta rasa	'Peace-flavour'; the quiet bliss that marks Guru's mature verse.

Recap

- Simile = quick bridge, metaphor = fusion
- Clouds across sky for fleeting emotion
- Mirror-mind simile cleanses perception
- Rope–snake metaphor collapses illusion
- Lamp with five wicks → sensory fuel
- Ocean of becoming, divine navigator

- Spider spins, eats web → Brahman & greed
- Serpent dance = kundalinī journey
- Steam-launch updates boat trope
- One image per verse: economy
- Comparison follows sound pattern
- Alliteration smooths cognitive shift
- Vehicles drawn from nature & craft
- Multilingual presentation (ML/Skt/Ta)
- Ethical cue embedded in picture
- Social protest via nautical metaphor
- Simile often opens stanza
- Metaphor occupies pivot lines
- Aphorism closes without image
- Critics call style 'decorated pedagogy'
- No ornament without insight payoff
- Comparison avoids scholastic jargon
- Accessible across caste & class
- Progression mirrors saguna→nirguna worship
- Modern objects can refresh the method

Objective Questions

1. Which term in Indian poetics names simile?
2. In which prayer does the 'steam-launch' image appear?
3. What object symbolises material and efficient cause in a metaphor discussed?

4. Which stanza uses clouds as the simile for emotion?
5. How does simile functions between idea and reader?
6. Name one Upaniṣadic metaphor revived by the Guru.
7. Which poetic device helps smooth the simile→metaphor slide?
8. Light dispels the rope-snake illusion; What does light here stands for here?
9. Daily object that replaced mirror in our suggested modern update?
10. How many core vehicles are mapped in this unit's first arc?

Answers

1. Upamā
2. Daiva Daśakam
3. Spider-web
4. AtmopadesaSatakam 29
5. Bridge
6. Chariot allegory
7. Alliteration
8. Knowledge
9. Mobile screen
10. Seven

Assignments

1. Critically examine the pedagogic efficacy of beginning with simile before advancing to metaphor in Narayana Guru's poems.
2. Compare the Guru's nautical imagery with a similar device in another bhakti poet.
3. 'Economy of comparison prevents verbal fatigue.' Discuss with reference to two poems.

4. Analyse the ethical implications of the spider-web metaphor in relation to consumer culture.

5. Explore how multilingual presentation of metaphors supports the Guru's social universalism.

6. Imagine updating one classic metaphor for today's digital audience; outline possibilities and challenges.

SGOU

UNIT 3

Use of Metre and Rhythm in Guru's Poetry

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- identify the principal Sanskrit and Malayalam metres employed by the Guru
- explain how rhythmic choice supports devotional, philosophical or reformist intent
- illustrate the fusion of classical prosody with indigenous cadence through textual samples
- evaluate the role of sound-pattern in meditation and social outreach

Prerequisites

Rhythm is not skin-deep music but the very pulse that carries vision from page to body. Guru wrote in three tongues, Sanskrit, Malayalam, Tamil, and each demanded a rhythmic home. Yet he refused to become a curator of prosodic museums. Instead, the classical metres such as anuṣṭup or śārdūlavikrīḍita was explored to meet the Dravidian forms like kīḷippāṭṭu in a living traffic of beats.

Consider the twelve-syllable bhujangaprayātam in Vināyakaṣṭakam: the very gait of a serpent sways through the lines addressing the elephant-headed Gaṇeśa. The rhythmic mimicry aligns sound with image, allowing theology enter the spine, not the archive. By contrast, in caste-reform songs Guru chooses nāthōnātha (11/9 syllables), a chantable street rhythm that hammers hierarchy with a worker's cadence. The selection is strategic: if meaning demands urgency, the beat shortens; if it is to invoke awe before deity, it lengthens to nineteen-syllable grandeur.

A Sanskrit half-verse may close on a Malayalam tag, relieving phonetic stiffness without breaking scholastic rigour. Obligatory sandhi joins sometimes to soften or, their absence masked by deliberate alliteration. Thus the poem remains metrically sound yet orally friendly.

Repetition of phonemes 'generates rhythm even in silent reading,' slowing breath into quasi-prāṇāyāma. In antādi chains the last word of one verse begins the next, denying the tongue a pause and so tethering wandering attention. Kīḻippāṭṭu refrains, with their flapping trochees, match exhalation; children chant them unknowing that they inhale doctrine.

To sum up, Guru's use of metre extends social reach. Kerala's print boom meant that a coconut-seller could buy a chap book; the poem could sing itself from her memory into that of her customers. Short, sturdy lines did the job. Meanwhile Sanskrit hymns for temple recitation preserved the prestige of pan-Indian culture, allowing reformist messages to travel under the respectable cloak of classical devotion.

Key themes

Metre, Bhujangaprayātam, Kīḻippāṭṭu, Antādi, Prosody, Chant-value, Breath-rhythm

Discussion

5.3.1 Musicality in Guru's Compositions

The musicality inherent in Sree Narayana Guru's works has been widely lauded, even by renowned musicians. C.K. Revamma, a celebrated musician, notably remarked that 'many great composers have contributed to the world of music, but only Guru has presented philosophical gems musically with a poetic beauty that even the most acclaimed poets have not achieved.' This observation underscores Guru's unique ability to merge profound philosophical insight with exquisite musicality. Some critics, acknowledging the richness of musicality in Guru's compositions, have even suggested that 'Guru Devan's dedication to *śabdālaṅkāra* (ശബ്ദാലങ്കാരം - sound ornaments) and sound usage conducive to music is far greater than his adherence to arthālaṅkāra (അർത്ഥാലങ്കാരം - meaning-based ornaments),' which further highlights the immense importance he placed on the musical dimension of his poems.

This inherent musicality is most palpable in Guru's *stōtrams* (സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ - hymns), where rhythmic recitation is an indispensable element. These stōtrams (സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ) possess both overt and inherent rhythms essential for their very nature. This pervasive musicality, both within and expressed through his compositions, could only originate from

a heart steeped in song. While there is no direct evidence that Guru formally studied music, it is well-documented that he deeply cherished it. Even the subtlest echoes of cosmic music are said to have stirred his soul. Biographers recount how, in his youth, Guru would climb trees and recite poems aloud, and his recitation of the Ramayana was noted for its melody. He even composed and devoutly recited hymns and other devotional songs for the women of Vanappally. There is no doubt that Guru possessed a deeply musical mind; it would be surprising if the sublime *stōtrams* (സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ) that flowed from such a mind were not inherently be musical.

5.3.2 Metrical Choices and Scholarly Interpretations

Guru predominantly utilized Sanskrit metres in his stōtrams (സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ), including Bhujangaprayātam (ഭുജംഗപ്രയാതം), Sragdhara (സ്രഗ്ദ്ധര) Śārdūla vikrīḍitam (ശാർദ്ദൂലവിക്രീഡിതം), Dodhakam (ദോധകം), Vasantatilakam (വസന്തതിലകം), Puṣpitāgra (പുഷ്പിതാഗ്ര), Madanārtta (മദനാർത്ത), and Gīti (ഗീതി). Among these, Sragdhara (സ്രഗ്ദ്ധര), Śārdūlavikrīḍitam (ശാർദ്ദൂലവിക്രീഡിതം), Mattebham (മത്തേഭം), and Madanārtta (മദനാർത്ത) appear more frequently. This choice of Sanskrit metres, despite Guru's emphasis on Dravidian idiom in language and style, presents an intriguing contrast. Dr. T. Bhaskaran points out this apparent paradox: 'Guru, who harmonized poetic cultures by employing antādiprāsam (അന്താദിപ്രാസം - a Tamil-style alliteration) within Sanskrit metres, used Sanskrit metres most extensively in his own works. This seems peculiar concerning Guru Deva's works, which demonstrate an intrinsic connection with Tamil language, culture, and philosophy.'

However, considering that the rhythm of poetry inherently stems from the mind's spontaneous flow, the technical distinction between Sanskrit and vernacular metres may not have been a primary concern for the Guru. He did not compose poetry for poetry's sake. Most of his stōtrams (സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ), except for praises of idol-forms (arcāvatārastuti - അർച്ചാവതാരസ്തുതികൾ), were a sweet and profound outpouring of devotion, like a river overflowing its banks. Therefore, one should not expect the rigorous adherence to precise metrical rules found in highly polished poetry that undergoes extensive revision. When words naturally flow from an uninhibited stream of experiential emotion, strict adherence to caesura (yati - യതി) or absence of caesura breaks (yatibhaṅgam - യതിഭംഗം) becomes less critical. Those who point out yatibhaṅgam (യതിഭംഗം) and metrical imperfections in Guru's works, especially his stōtrams (സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ), often overlook this organic process. Dr. T. Bhaskaran acknowledges this in his discussion of Guru's metrical usage, noting instances of non-adherence to yati (യതി), the intensive and casual use of cillu (ചില്ല് - half-letters), and the sandhi (സന്ധി - combination) of words at the end and the beginning of successive half-lines. Yet, these deviations do not compromise the musicality of his compositions. Guru never resorted to meaningless words merely to fill a metre.

5.3.3 Prominent Metres in Guru's Works

Anuṣṭup (അനുഷ്ടുപ്): Although Guru predominantly used Sanskrit metres, Anuṣṭup (അനുഷ്ടുപ്), a widely used Sanskrit meter with eight syllables per foot, was a frequent choice. Since Anuṣṭup (അനുഷ്ടുപ്) is commonly used to convey profound subjects in a prose-

like manner, Guru primarily employed it in his prescriptive works (anuśāsana kṛtikaḷ-അനുശാസനകൃതികൾ) such as *Darśanamāla* (ദർശനമാല), *Dharma Ślōkatrayī* (ധർമ്മം ശ്ലോകത്രയീ), *Dattāpahāram* (ദത്താപഹാരം), and *Sadācāram* (സദാചാരം). Among his *stōtrams* (സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ), *Daivadaśakam* (ദൈവദശകം) and the first śloka (ശ്ലോകം) of *Navamañjari* (നവമഞ്ജരി) have been composed in *Anuṣṭup* (അനുഷ്ടുപ്പ്). The directness and conceptual depth, particularly in *Daivadaśakam* (ദൈവദശകം), have been heightened by its concise use of Anuṣṭup (അനുഷ്ടുപ്പ്) meter, as keen observers notice from its unique simplicity and grandeur stem in the choice of this metrical pattern in the composition.

Bhujangaprayātam (ഭുജംഗപ്രയാതം): Seven of Guru's Sanskrit *stōtrams* (സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ) are in different metres, with *Vināyakāṣṭakam* (വിനായകാഷ്ടകം) being in Bhujangaprayātam (ഭുജംഗപ്രയാതം). This meter is characterized by its emphasis on rhythm, its name suggesting a slow, gliding rhythm akin to a serpent's movement. It is considered ideal for expressing devotion and detachment (virakti - വിരക്തി), which is why ancient poets adopted it for spiritual hymns. This *stōtram* (സ്തോത്രം), reminiscent of Shankaracharya's *Śivabhujangaprayātam* (ശിവഭുജംഗപ്രയാതം), is exceptionally musical due to the presence of anuprāsam (അനുപ്രാസം - alliteration/assonance) in every foot. P. Raman notes the suitability of this meter for *stōtrams* (സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ), observing that 'a dance-like experience in the mind and body of an individual, whose devotion has reached its peak and who is realising the worshipped deity, is natural. There is no meter in the language like Bhujangaprayātam (ഭുജംഗപ്രയാതം) to fully convey this bliss-born dance experience.'

***Kāḷīnāṭakam* (കാളിനാടകം):** Guru's *Kāḷīnāṭakam* (കാളിനാടകം) is a rare stōtram (സ്തോത്രം) where he made words rhythmically dance. Alongside the head-to-toe description of the Goddess, the poem invokes her power as the creator, preserver, and destroyer across various emotional states, blending lāsya (ലാസ്യം - gentle dance) and tāṇḍava (താണ്ഡവം - vigorous dance) in an astonishing manner. Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati recounted an instance where a girl who sang and danced Kāḷīnāṭakam (കാളിനാടകം) at the Gurukula became so absorbed that she fainted, illustrating its electrifying power. The metre of Kāḷīnāṭakam (കാളിനാടകം) was considered a type of Daṇḍaka (ദണ്ഡകം), similar to Kalidasa's *Śyāmaḷādaṇḍakam* (ശ്യാമളാദണ്ഡകം), likely due to the comparable agility of its word arrangement. Dr. T. Bhaskaran, in his commentary, notes that *Kāḷīnāṭakam*(കാളിനാടകം) is a composition that has been rhythmically held but is composed in a Dravidian meter. Ullur seems to have called it Daṇḍakam (ദണ്ഡകം).' He further observed in 'Sreenarayanaguruvinte Kāvyasaraṇi' (ശ്രീനാരായണഗുരുവിന്റെ കാവ്യസരണി) that 'all of Guru Deva's works in Malayalam and Sanskrit, except *Kāḷīnāṭakam* (കാളിനാടകം) and *Kuṇḍalinīppāṭṭu* (കുണ്ഡലിനിപ്പാട്ട്), are composed in Sanskrit metres. *Kāḷīnāṭakam* (കാളിനാടകം) resembles Bhujangaprayātam (ഭുജംഗപ്രയാതം); if desired, it too can be considered a Sanskrit metre.' P. Raman, in his essay 'Musicality in Guru Deva's Works,' states that 'Guru Devan composed *Vināyakāṣṭakam* (വിനായകാഷ്ടകം) and *Kāḷīnāṭakam* (കാളിനാടകം) in the Bhujangaprayātam (ഭുജംഗപ്രയാതം) meter. A meter with four 'yakāras' (യകാരങ്ങൾ - syllables) is not a Sanskrit meter; it is a vernacular meter called Kākaḷi (കാകളി). In any case, this meter possesses an extremely powerful rhythm capable of immersing the listener

in blissful ecstasy.' Some even consider it akin to a Siṁhavikrānta Daṇḍaka (സിംഹവിക്രാന്തം ദണ്ഡകം).

A.R. Rajarajavarma, in *Vṛttamañjari* (വൃത്തമഞ്ജരി), defines Bhujangaprayātam (ഭുജംഗപ്രയാതം) as having four 'yakāras' (യകാരങ്ങൾ). It belongs to the Jagati chandas ജഗതിച്ഛന്ദസ്സ്), which has twelve syllables per foot. Both Vināyakāṣṭakam (വിനായകാഷ്ടകം) and *Kāḷīnāṭakam* (കാളിനാടകം) indeed have twelve syllables per foot. Metrical scholars generally classify Bhujangaprayātam (ഭുജംഗപ്രയാതം) within the Sanskrit metre family. Its closest equivalent in vernacular metres is the Kākaḷi (കാകളി) family. Dr. T.V. Mathew, in *Vṛttavipaṅcika* (വൃത്തവിപഞ്ചിക), states that 'all meters with five *mātrās* (മാത്രകൾ) - prosodic units) per *gaṇa* (ഗണം - foot) belong to the Kākaḷi (കാകളി) family, which can have three to five syllables.' A.R. describes Kākaḷi (കാകളി) as a composition where 'a gaṇa (ഗണം) is formed by three syllables yielding five *mātrās (*മാത്രകൾ). Four such *gaṇas* (ഗണങ്ങൾ) form the first foot, and similarly the second foot, making an eight-*gaṇa* (ഗണം) couplet. This style is called Kākaḷi (കാകളി).' Kuttikrishna Marar further clarifies that 'it is unquestionable that a five-*mātrā* (മാത്ര) *gaṇa* (ഗണം) can have not only three- and five-syllable units but also four-syllable units.' P. Kunhikrishna Menon also includes five-*mātrā* (മാത്ര) *gaṇas* (ഗണം) in the Paiṅkiḷi gōtram (പൈങ്കിളിഗോത്രം - Kākaḷi family), and K.K. Vadhyar observes that despite a gaṇa (ഗണം) having five *mātrās* (മാത്ര), the yakāra (യകാരം- a specific metrical foot) with five *mātrās* (മാത്രകൾ) is relatively rare in Kākaḷi (കാകളി) itself. From these discussions, it becomes clear that there are rare meters in the Kākaḷi (കാകളി) family composed of four gaṇas (ഗണങ്ങൾ). The meter of *Kāḷīnāṭakam* (കാളിനാടകം) is one such rare meter, and its strong resemblance to Bhujangaprayātam (ഭുജംഗപ്രയാതം) cannot be denied. Dr. Bhaskaran's observation in 'Sreenarayanaguruvinte Kāvyasaraṇi' (ശ്രീനാരായണഗുരുവിന്റെ കാവ്യസരണി) that 'it is self-evident that rhythm will be prominent when the same gaṇa (ഗണം) is repeated four times is noteworthy. Although *Kāḷīnāṭakam* (കാളിനാടകം) resembles Bhujangaprayātam (ഭുജംഗപ്രയാതം), (in its metrical pattern, one might wonder whether it was not a Malayalam metre relevant for this composition. Given that there is no specific name for a Kākaḷi (കാകളി) meter with four 'yakāras' (യകാരങ്ങൾ), it is reasonable to consider the metre of Kāḷīnāṭakam (കാളിനാടകം) as a vernacular one belonging to the Kākaḷi (കാകളി) family. The third verse of *Manṇantala Devīstāvam* (മണ്ണന്തല ദേവീസ്തവം) is also composed in Bhujan gaprayātam (ഭുജംഗപ്രയാതം).

Sragdhara (സ്രഗ്ദ്ധര): *Ṣaṇmukha Daśakam* (ഷൺമുഖദശകം), Subrahmaṇya Kīrtanam (സുബ്രഹ്മണ്യകീർത്തനം), and *Bāhuleyāṣṭakam* (ബാഹുലേയാഷ്ടകം) are composed in the Sragdhara (സ്രഗ്ദ്ധര) meter, which falls under the Prakriti chandas (പ്രകൃതിച്ഛന്ദസ്സ്) with twenty-one syllables.

Śārdūlavikrīḍitam (ശാർദ്ദൂല വിക്രീഡിതം): This meter belongs to the Atikṛti chandas (അതികൃതിച്ഛന്ദസ്സ്), with nineteen syllables per foot. *Bhadrākāḷyāṣṭakam* (ഭദ്രകാളൃഷ്ടകം), *Ardhanārīśvara Stavam* (അർദ്ധനാരീശ്വരസ്തവം), *Śrīkṛṣṇa Darśanam* (ശ്രീകൃഷ്ണദർശനം), and the fourth verse of *Manṇantala Devīstāvam* (മണ്ണന്തലദേവീസ്തവം) are examples of Guru's use of Śārdūlavikrīḍitam ((ശാർദ്ദൂലവിക്രീഡിതം).

Kusumamañjari (കുസുമമഞ്ജരി): This twenty-one-syllable meter also belongs to the Prakriti chandas (പ്രകൃതി

ച്ഛന്ദസ്സ്). Verses 5, 6, 7, and 8 of *Manṇantala Devīstāvam* (മണ്ണന്തലദേവീസ്തവം) are composed in Kusumamañjari കുസുമ മഞ്ജരി).

Mattebham (മത്തേഭം): A long meter that Guru greatly favored, Mattebham (മത്തേഭം) has twenty-two syllables and belongs to the Akṛti chandas (ആകൃതിച്ഛന്ദസ്സ്). *Ṣaṇmāturastavaṁ* (ഷാൺമാതുരസ്തവം), *Navamañjari* (നവമഞ്ജരി) and *Janani Navaratna mañjari* (ജനനീനവരത്നമഞ്ജരി) are composed in this meter. P. Raman highlights the unique characteristic of this meter, noting its 'mesmerizing rhythmic beauty.' The name 'Mattebham' (മത്തേഭം - intoxicated elephant) likely derives from the heavy, dignified rhythm of an elephant's gait.

Narkuṭakam (നർക്കുടകം): This meter, belonging to the Atyaṣṭi chandas (അത്യഷ്ടിച്ഛന്ദസ്സ്), has seventeen syllables per foot. Only *Śivastavaṁ* (ശിവസ്തവം) is composed in this meter by Guru. Its lack of significant musicality might explain why Guru did not use it for other *stōtrams* (സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ). Nevertheless, Guru showed a particular interest in employing rare meters.

Mallika (മല്ലിക): The Mallika (മല്ലിക) meter, with eighteen syllables, belonging to the Kṛti chandas (കൃതിച്ഛന്ദസ്സ്), is used by Guru in *Ṣaṇmukha Stōtram* (ഷൺമുഖസ്തോത്രം). *Guhāṣṭakam* (ഗുഹാഷ്ടകം) also uses a meter from the Dhṛti chandas (ധൃതിച്ഛന്ദസ്സ്), though it lacks a specific name. Dr. T. Bhaskaran notes its popularity in the stōtram (സ്തോത്രം) branch of poetry, stating that Shankaracharya's *Govindāṣṭakam* (ഗോവിന്ദാഷ്ടകം) uses the same meter. He further explains that the gaṇas (ഗണങ്ങൾ) divide as 'masatayabhama', a sequence not explicitly named in treatises on meters for the Dhṛti chandas (ധൃതിച്ഛന്ദസ്സ്). However, P. Raman believes its meter is one of the 'extremely musical Ūnataraṅgiṇīs (ഊന തരംഗിണികൾ).' The meter of *Guhāṣṭakam* (ഗുഹാഷ്ടകം) is a long meter, and long meters are generally conducive to musical recitation, which might explain their appeal to Maṇipravāḷam (മണിപ്രവാളം) poets. However, Guru's aim was not merely to evoke superficial emotions like the Maṇipravāḷam(മണിപ്രവാളം) poets; as music served as wings to achieve his deeper objectives. This is why he predominantly employed long meters

Vasantatilakam (വസന്തതിലകം): This is one of Guru's most frequently used meters, belonging to the Śakvari chandas (ശക്വരിച്ഛന്ദസ്സ്) with fourteen syllables per foot. *Piṇḍanandi* (പിണ്ഡ നന്ദി), *Indriyavairāgyam* (ഇന്ദ്രിയവൈ രാഗ്യം), *Śrīvāsudevāṣṭakam* (ശ്രീവാസുദേവാ ഷ്ടകം), and the ninth verse of Maṇṇantala Devīstavam (മണ്ണന്തലദേവീ സ്തവം) are composed in Vasantatilakam (വസന്തതിലകം). It is a commonly used meter for *stōtrams* (സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ) in general, with many Suprabhāta Kīrtanams (സുപ്രഭാതകീർത്തനങ്ങൾ) - morning hymns) also in Vasantatilakam (വസന്തതിലകം). Few meters can evoke a sense of serenity (prasādātmakatvam - പ്രസാദാത്മകത്വം) as effectively as Vasantatilakam (വസന്തതിലകം).

Madanārtta (മദനാർത്ത) : Another fourteen-syllable meter, Madanārtta (മദനാർത്ത), is used in Guru's *Kōlatīrēśa stavam* (കോലതീരേശസ്തവം). This meter was highly popular in vernacular poetry.

Toḍakam (തോടകം),: *Śivaprasāda pañcakam*(ശിവപ്രസാദപഞ്ചകം) *Cijjaḍa cintanam* (ചിജ്ജഡചിന്തനം) are *stōtrams* (സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ) composed in the Toḍakam (തോടകം) meter. Composed of four 'sagaṇas' (സഗണങ്ങൾ - a type of metrical foot), this meter facilitates fast-paced recitation. Although both *stōtrams*

(സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ) use the same meter, variations in word arrangement create perceptibly different rhythms.

Pañcacāmaram (പഞ്ചചാമരം): *Sadāśivadarśanam* (സദാശിവദർശനം) is a *stōtram (*സ്തോത്രം) composed in Pañcacāmaram (പഞ്ചചാമരം). However, in the fifth verse of *Sadāśivadarśanam* (സദാശിവദർശനം), the order of Pañcacā maram (പഞ്ചചാമരം) changes; instead of the laghu-guru (ഗുരു ലഘു - short-long) sequence, a guru-laghu (ലഘു ഗുരു - long-short) sequence is observed, a variation known as Paryasta Cāmaram (പര്യസ്തചാമരം) in metrical analysis. K.K. Vadhyar describes this as a very ancient and prominent meter, used in Niranam (നിരനം) compositions and the evening hymn 'Rāma Rāma Pāhi Mām' (രാമ രാമ പാഹി മാം).

Dodhakām (ദോധകം): *Cidaṁba rāṣṭakam* (ചിദംബരാഷ്ടകം) is a *stōtram* (സ്തോത്രം) composed in the Dodhakām (ദോധകം) meter, which has eleven syllables per foot and belongs to the Tr̥ṣṭup (തൃഷ്ടുപ്പിൽ) *chandas*. It is formed by three 'bhagaṇas' (ഭഗണവും - a specific metrical foot) followed by two 'gurus' (ഗുരുവും - long syllables). The repetition of 'bhagaṇas' (ഭഗണങ്ങൾ) greatly aids the rhythmic recitation characteristic of nāmajapam (നാമജപം - chanting divine names).

Pathyā Vr̥ttam (പഥ്യാവൃത്തം): This fourteen - syllable meter belongs to the Śakvari chandas (ശകാരിച്ഛന്ദസ്സ്). Guru's *Devīstavaṁ* (ദേവീസ്തവം) is composed in this meter, though Guru does not strictly adhere to yati (യതി).

Gīti (ഗീതി): Gīti (ഗീതി) is a mātrāvr̥ttam (മാത്രാവൃത്തം - a meter based on prosodic length). It requires twelve *mātrās* (മാത്രകൾ) in the first and third feet, and eighteen *mātrās* (മാത്രകൾ) in the second and fourth feet. *Svānubhavagīti* (സ്വാനുഭവഗീതി) is composed in the Gīti (ഗീതി) meter.

Upajāti (ഉപജാതി): Guru's *Viṣṇvasta akam* (വിഷ്ണ്വഷ്ടകം) is composed in Upajāti (ഉപജാതി). This is a mixed meter combining Indravajra (ഇന്ദ്രവജ്ര), Upendravajra (ഉപേന്ദ്രവജ്ര), and Vaṁśaṣṭa (വംശസ്ഥ). The first verse mixes Indravajra (ഇന്ദ്രവജ്ര) and Upendravajra (ഉപേന്ദ്രവജ്ര); the second, Indravajra (ഇന്ദ്രവജ്ര) and Upendravajra (ഉപേ ന്ദ്രവജ്ര); the third, Indravajra (ഇന്ദ്രവജ്ര), Upendravajra (ഉപേന്ദ്രവജ്ര), and Vaṁśaṣṭa (വംശസ്ഥ); the fourth, Upendravajra (ഉപേ ന്ദ്രവജ്ര) and Vaṁśaṣṭa (വംശസ്ഥ); the fifth, Indravajra (ഇന്ദ്രവജ്ര) and Vaṁśaṣṭa (വംശസ്ഥ); the sixth, Indravajra (ഇന്ദ്രവ ജ്ര) and Vaṁśaṣṭa (വംശസ്ഥ); the seventh, Indravajra (ഇന്ദ്രവജ്ര) and Vaṁśaṣṭa (വംശസ്ഥ); and the eighth, Upendravajra (ഉപേന്ദ്രവജ്ര). *Manṇantala Devīstavam* (മണ്ണന്തലദേവീസ്തവം) and *Śivaśatakam* (ശിവശതകം) are examples of *stōtrams* (സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ) composed using more than one meter.

Metres in *Śivaśatakam*

Fifty-eight ślokas (ശ്ലോകങ്ങൾ) in Śivaśatakam (ശിവശതകം) (verses 1-43, 45-50, 69-72, 82, 87, 93, 100) are in a meter known as Mr̥gendramukham (മൃഗേന്ദ്രമുഖം) also referred to as Acala (അചല) and Suvakta (സുവക്ത). Both *Śivaśatakam* (ശിവശതകം) and *Atmopadesa Śatakam* (ആത്മോപദേശ ശതകം) exhibit rhythmic experiments. The hundred *ślokas* (ശ്ലോകങ്ങൾ) of *Atmopadesa Śatakam* (ആത്മോപദേശ ശതകം) and fifty-eight ślokas (ശ്ലോകങ്ങൾ) of *Śivaśatakam* (ശിവശതകം) are composed in a samavr̥ttam (സമവൃത്തം - regular meter) created by transposing the gaṇa (ഗണം) arrangement of the even feet (Na, Ja, Ja, Ra, Ga) from Puṣpitāgra (പുഷ്പിതാഗ്ര - an

ardhasamavṛttam - അർദ്ധസമവൃത്തം with Na, Na, Ra, Ya in odd feet) to the odd feet as well. Guru effectively eliminated the metrical difference between the two half-lines within a śloka (ശ്ലോകം), unifying them into a single consistent pattern. In *Śivaśatakam* (ശിവശതകം), twenty-two ślokas (ശ്ലോകങ്ങൾ) (51-54, 57-59, 62-65, 68-74, 83-85, 89-92, 94-95) use a meter with gaṇas (ഗണങ്ങൾ) as Na, Ja, Ja, Ja, Ga. Verses 75-81 and 97-99 (ten ślokas - ശ്ലോകങ്ങൾ) are in Drutavilambitam (ദ്രുതവിളംബിതം), which has Na, Bha, Bha, Ra. Śloka (ശ്ലോകം), 96 is an Upajāti (ഉപജാതി) combining Drutavilambitam (ദ്രുതവിളംബിതം) and Na, Ja, Ja, Ja, Ga. The meter with gaṇas (ഗണങ്ങൾ) as Na, Ja, Ja, Ja, Ga is a newly identified meter.

Mananātītam (മനനാതീതം) is composed in a meter with fifteen syllables per foot, arranged as Jagana, Sagana, Nagana, Bhagana, Yagana. *Vṛttamañjari* (വൃത്തമഞ്ജരി) does not mention any meter with this specific arrangement. A meter with fourteen syllables per foot is called Mayūralalitam (മയൂരലളിതം), defined as 'Mayūralalitam bhavathi jasanabhaya śvet.'

The meter of Kuṇḍalinīppāṭṭu (കുണ്ഡലിനിപ്പാട്ട്) also lacks a specific name. Dr. T. Bhaskaran observes that 'it can be recited like a mañjari (മഞ്ജരി).' The pattern is twelve syllables in the first line and ten in the second.

Tamil Metres (തമിഴ് വൃത്തങ്ങൾ): Guru's effortless command over Tamil metres is exemplified by *Thevarappathinkangal* (തേവാരപ്പതികങ്ങൾ). The first *padikam* (പതികം) is composed in Arūcīr Āśiriya Viruttam (അരുചീർ അശിരിയ വിരുത്തം), a Tamil meter. Kaḷittura (കലിത്തുറ) is the meter for the second, fourth, and fifth *padikams* (പതികങ്ങൾ), while the third *padikam* (പതികം) is in Kaḷiviruttam (കലിവിരുത്തം).

5.3.4 Organic Creation and the Fusion of Sound and Sense

It is unlikely that Guru consciously experimented with metres or deliberately created new ones. Writing poetry itself might not have been a conscious, analytical process for him. He did not compose *stōtrams* (സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ) by meticulously analyzing feet or conducting metrical experiments. Instead, most of his *stōtrams* (സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ) were an uninhibited flow of intense devotional experience welling up from within. As they are recited, one never senses a disruption of rhythm, implying no metrical flaw either.

It is thought-provoking why Guru, who expressed Dravidian identity in all aspects, relied on Sanskrit metres for his poetry. It is plausible that he did not have a deliberate goal of composing solely in Sanskrit metres. Instead, it is more reasonable to assume that the poems simply flowed in rhythms familiar to his mind. One could even say that Guru achieved a synthesis in the realm of metre, blending Sanskrit metrical structures with vernacular ones, as seen in *Kāḷīnāṭakam* (കാളിനാടകം), *Mananātītam* (മനനാതീതം), and *Kuṇḍalinīppāṭṭu* (കുണ്ഡലിനിപ്പാട്ട്). Dr. T. Bhaskaran rightly observes that 'Guru Deva's works are the linguistic manifestation of the lightness of heart experienced when awakening from meditation in the solitude of Marutvamala, Velikkunnu, or Aruvippuram. The rhythm that pulses within them is rooted in the subconscious.' Dr. Sukumar Azhikode, in his essay on the metre of *Atmopadesa Śatakam* (ആത്മോപദേശശതകം), highlights Guru's innate genius in metrical usage: 'One should not assume that poets compose poetry by consulting metrical treatises. Lord Brahma himself enlightened Sage Valmiki, who composed the Adikaavya (ആദികാവ്യം - Ramayana)

without any knowledge of prosody, that what he had created was indeed a *śloka* (ശ്ലോകം). Similarly, it is perfectlycorrect to assume that Sree Narayana, through his spontaneous brilliance, composed *Atmopadesa Śatakam* (ആത്മോപദേശ ശതകം) in a rare meter.' This observation is relevant not only for *Atmopadesa Śatakam* (ആത്മോപദേശ ശതകം) but for all his compositions in novel metres.

Guru consistently utilized metres brimming with musicality in his poetic compositions. Alongside these metrical styles, the external rhythm of *śabdālaṅkārās* (ശബ്ദാലങ്കാരങ്ങൾ - sound ornaments) and other devices played a crucial role in enhancing the musicality. K. Achyutapothuval, in his article on Krishnanattam (കൃഷ്ണനാട്ടം), emphasizes the importance of sound arrangement in *stōtrams* (സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ): 'The principle that lyrical poems, especially those that arouse devotion, should possess beauty of sound and smooth connection, might have led the poet to use rhythmic arrangements and well-connected songs, as it is experientially evident that they create unique emotional melting in both the singer and the listeners during performance.' These emotional melting are paramount in *stōtrams* (സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ). It implies that *śabdālaṅkārās* (ശബ്ദാലങ്കാരങ്ങൾ), rather than *arthālaṅkārās* (അർത്ഥാലങ്കാരങ്ങൾ), are primarily responsible for making *stōtrams* (സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ) emotionally resonant. Guru's *stōtrams* (സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ) are certainly no exception in this regard. The crystallization of rhythm is achieved through the specific arrangement and repetition of sounds, a skill in which Guru was truly gifted.

Beyond employing various types of prāsam (പ്രാസം - rhyme), Guru also adopted other methods to achieve musicality in his *stōtrams* (സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ). One such method is ending words with anusvāra (അനുസ്വാരം - a nasal sound), as seen in this *śloka* (ശ്ലോകം) from *Bhadrākāḷyāṣṭakam* (ഭദ്രകാളൃഷ്ടകം):

മാതംഗശ്രുതിഭൂഷിണീം മധുരവീവാണീ-
സുധാമോഷിണീം
ഭൂവിക്ഷേപകടാക്ഷവീക്ഷണവിസർഗ്ഗ-
ക്ഷേമസംഹാരിണീം മാതംഗീം
മഹിഷാസുരപ്രമഥിനീം
മാധുർയ്യധുർയ്യാകര-
ശ്രീകാരോത്തരപാണി പങ്കജപുടീം ശ്രീ
ഭദ്രകാളീം ഭജേ.

There is no doubt that this śloka (ശ്ലോകം) creates a musical experience akin to the gentle ringing of a puja bell in one's mind.

The specific combination of words is a crucial element underpinning the musicality. The smooth flow of words (bandhamasyaṇata - ബന്ധമസ്യണത capable of evoking verbal music resides within this word arrangement. The charm of Changampuzha's (ചങ്ങമ്പുഴ) poetry lies in this. This quality is equally abundant in Guru's works. One could endlessly cite examples from Guru's compositions, especially his *stōtrams* (സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ), showcasing the smooth flow created by the harmonious combination of simple and beautiful folk words. *Janani Navaratnamañjari* (ജനനീനവരത്ന മഞ്ജരി), Kāḷīnāṭakam (കാളിനാടകം), and *Subrahmaṇya Kīrtanam* (സുബ്രഹ്മണ്യകീർത്തനം) are excellent examples of this. C.K. Revamma's observation regarding a *śloka* (ശ്ലോകം) from *Janani Navaratnamañjari* (ജനനീന വരത്നമഞ്ജരി) serves as a testament to the musicality of Guru's works: 'Its composition is woven into the rhythm. At the end of each line, a rhythmic repetition leaves space. Any raga (രാഗം) suitable for elaborate rendition can be adapted to it. The experience of singing this composition, setting the pitch and focusing the mind on Guru, is ineffable. It is very difficult to express its musicality in writing; its sweetness can only be truly experienced

when listened in rendition heard sung.' Thus, both poetic artistry and musicality are equally harmonious in Guru's *stōtrams* (സ്തോത്രങ്ങൾ).

5.3.5 The Art of Rhyme and Repetition

Prāsam refers to the aesthetically pleasing arrangement of letters or words. It is utilized in various forms, including ādi prāsam (initial rhyme), dvitīyākṣara prāsam (second-syllable rhyme), antya prāsam (end rhyme), vyatyānupāsam (alternating rhyme), and anuprāsam (alliteration/assonance). During Guru's time, *prāsam* was an integral component of Malayalam poetry, with dvitīyākṣara prāsam being particularly favored. Guru also held a strong preference for it. However, most of his *stōtrams* predominantly employ antya prāsam as it is highly convenient for weaving together descriptions of the chosen deity in the second singular form. *Vināyakāṣṭakam* and *Guhāṣṭakam* stand as exquisite examples of *antya prāsam* usage.

Beyond Malayalam rhyme schemes, Guru also incorporated Tamil *prāsam* forms, with antādi prāsam being a significant one. Guru's *Śivastavam*, titled *Prapañcasṛṣṭi*, is itself known as *Antādi*. This particular *prāsam* is highly important in Tamil poetry. *Antādi* involves starting a new verse with the last word, the last two letters, or the main word of the last line of the preceding verse. Works belonging to the *Pattu* literary tradition, such as *Rāmacaritam* and *Kaṇṇaśśarāmāyaṇam*, utilize *antādi*. In the sixty retrieved verses of Guru's *Svānubhava Gīti* (a century of verses), *antādi* is evident:

മംഗളമെൻമേലരുളും
തങ്ങളിലൊന്നിച്ചിടുന്ന സർവ്വജ്ഞൻ
സംഗമമൊന്നിലുമില്ലാ-
തംഗജരിപുവിൽ തെളിഞ്ഞു കൺ കാണും
കാണും കണ്ണിലടങ്ങി.
ക്കാണുന്നില്ല. നിരന്തരം സകലം
കാണം ചെവിയിലടങ്ങു-
ന്നോണം ത്വക്കിൽ തുലഞ്ഞു മറ്റതു പോം.

This chaining style, where verses are interlinked, helps maintain a continuous chain of memory.

Another śabdālaṅkāra favored by Guru is yamakam, which involves the precise repetition of two or more letters in the same order but with different meanings. Guhāṣṭakam serves as a prime example of yamakam usage, where the yamakam also carries virōdhābhāsam (paradoxical meaning) and dhvani (suggested meaning).

ശാന്തം ശംഭുതനുജം സത്യമനാധാരം
ജഗദാധാരം
ജ്ഞാത്യജ്ഞാനനിരന്തരലോക
ഗുണാതീതം ഗുരുണാതീതം
വല്ലീവത്സലഭ്യംഗാരണ്യകതാരുണ്യം
വരകാരുണ്യം
സേനാസാരമുദാരം പ്രണമത ദേവേശം
ഗുഹമാവേശം

Many of the descriptive pairs in these verses are intentionally used with contradictory meanings. Dr. T. Bhaskaran points out that the Tamil ornament 'cholmurun,' which combines yamakam and virōdhābhāsam, was highly favored by the Swami. This ornament is highly effective for memorizing stōtrams. Verses six, seven, and ten of Ṣaṇmukha Daśakam exemplify Guru's skill in employing yamakam. Let's examine the sixth verse:

കൂറിൽ കൂറുണ്ടു വെണ്ണീർ നറുമലർ കളഭ-
കൂട്ടണിഞ്ഞുൾ വിളങ്ങും
മാറും മാറും മനത്തീയരിയകൊടു മുടി-
ക്കാതലെൻ കല്ലുനെഞ്ചേ-
തേറും തേറും തിരഞ്ഞീടകമലരൊളിവു
ള്ളത്തിരുക്കോലമെന്നാൽ
നീറും നീറും നിരപ്പേ നിരയ നിരയുമ-
പ്പെയ്യുമയ്യമ്പവമ്പും

(Ṣaṇmukha Daśakam)

Here, the word (കൂറ്) is used with varying meanings like 'affection' and 'zodiac sign;' (മാറും മാറും) as 'chest' and 'to move away;' (തേറും തേറും) as 'increased' and 'to search', ' and (നീറും നീറും) as 'to melt' and 'to burn.' Guru also incorporated Tamil *śabdālaṅkāra* techniques that involve repeating letters based on metrical units:

ഇണങ്ങി ഇരുകൊങ്കയുമിളക്കി
പിണങ്ങളൊടു പേടി

Such mastery of *śabdālaṅkārās* was effortless for Guru.

Indian poetics distinguishes śabda-alaṅkāras (sound-figures) from artha-alaṅkāras (sense-figures). Guru's early hymns privilege the former, flooding the ear with dvitīyākṣara-prāsa (second-syllable rhyme), anupraāsa (alliteration), and yamaka (echo with shifting meaning). Sound here is not decoration alone; it shapes contemplative rhythm and aids mnemonic recitation.

A single stanza from Śivaśatakam illustrates how music and meaning interlock:

മലരടി രണ്ടിലുമിട്ട പുഞ്ചിലങ്ക
കുലകൾ കൊരുത്തു കളിച്ചിടുന്ന നേരം
കലകലയെന്നു കിലുങ്ങിടും ചിലമ്പി-
ന്നൊലി ചെവി രണ്ടിലുമെന്നു
കേൾക്കുമീ ഞാൻ?

The liquid la-ka-la sequence sustains an acoustic wave that mirrors the poem's image of tinkling anklets in the poem. Such passages show Guru's mastery in turning the sonic craft into a devotional experience above the mere verbal glitter in poetic compositions.

Recap

- Sound-pulse carries meaning beyond statement
- Sanskrit anuṣṭup for logical clarity
- Bhujangaprayātam = serpent gait
- Śārdūlavikrīḍita for majestic sweep
- Sragdharā hosts ornate praise
- Mattēbham heavy yet stately 22-beat
- Indigenous kīḷippāṭṭu → parrot-song lilt
- Kakali 3-3-3-3 trochaic roll
- Nāthōnātha 11/9 chant for slogans
- Kēka 12-syllable serpent swing
- Antādi chain links verse-ends to verse-opens

- Fusion: split couplet Sanskrit + Malayalam
- Sandhi softening for mouthfeel
- Alliterative glue masks quantity slips
- Rhythm guides silent-reading meditation
- Breath aligns with syllabic groupings
- Child-friendly refrain aids memory
- Long line metres evoke awe
- Social reform rides street rhythm
- Devotional awe rides stotra metre
- No wasted metre: one purpose each poem
- Critics: 'decorated pedagogy' of sound
- Metrics never drown sense, support it
- Rhythmic mimicry (anklet stanza) enacts image
- Cadence becomes quiet prāṇāyāma

Objective Questions

1. Which nineteen-syllable metre does the Guru use for majestic vision?
2. Name the Dravidian form nicknamed 'parrot-song.'
3. What rhythmic device links the last and first words of adjacent verses?
4. Which metre is titled 'gait of an elephant'?
5. In which hymn does bhujangaprayātam appear?
6. Silent reading rhythm aligns with which yogic practice?
7. What does the 11/9 chant metre supporting reform slogans is called ?
8. Which critic observed that stotra metres make philosophy hum on the peasant's lip?

9. In which rule alliteration is used to mask minor slips in what rule?
10. What is the principal function of rhythmic repetition in antādi?

Answers

1. Śārdūlavikrīḍita
2. Kīḷippāṭṭu
3. Antādi
4. Mattēbham
5. Vināyakaṣṭakam
6. Prāṇāyāma
7. Nāthōnātha
8. Sukumar Azhikode
9. Sandhi
10. Preventing mental pause / sustaining mantra-flow

Assignments

1. Discuss the relationship between breath and line-length in Guru's Malayalam hymns.
2. Analyse how metre selection enhances social critique in caste-abolition songs.
3. Compare the Guru's use of bhujangaprayātam with its employment in another Indian tradition.
4. Evaluate fusion techniques that allow Sanskrit metres to accommodate Malayalam phonotactics.
5. 'Rhythm renders philosophy audible even in silence.' Defend or refute with textual analysis.
6. Design a performance plan where different metres stage a thematic progression from ignorance to realisation.

BLOCK - 5

UNIT

Influence of Sanskrit Devotional Poetry on Guru

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- summarise the historical development of Sanskrit stotra literature and its key features
- trace direct and creative echoes of Shankaracharya and other Sanskrit poets in Guru's works
- analyse how Guru adapts classical metres, images and logical structures for Malayalam audiences
- evaluate the poet's contribution to social philosophy through Sanskrit-informed aesthetics

Prerequisites

Kerala's temple bells, Vedic chants and colonial steam-whistles once overlapped Malayalam literary landscape in the analogy of the soundscape. Into this polyphony Narayana Guru introduced poems that wore the robe of classical Sanskrit devotion while marching toward modern social freedom. His engagement with Sanskrit stotra literature, especially the hymns of Adi Shankaracharya, was neither slavish imitation nor iconoclastic rupture. Rather, it was a dialogue in which inherited metres, figures and arguments were bent toward the needs of the oppressed Malayali community in the twentieth century.

Stotra evolution stretches from Ṛg-Vedic praise songs, through Purāṇic litanies, to Shankara's philosophically rich hymns that combine bhakti, vairāgya and mokṣa. Kerala itself fostered this tradition: Melpathur's Narayaneeyam condensed the Bhāgavata in one hundred cantos; countless anonymous chants echoed in every

village shrine etc . The Guru drew his poetic craft from this reservoir. Early Sanskrit compositions such as Vinayakaṣṭakam, Vasudevāṣṭakam and Guhāṣṭakam mirror Shankara's ashtaka form and rhythmic elegance, yet their imagery often carries local colour, steam-launch feet, coiled serpent, ocean of mercy and the like.

Imitation served apprenticeship, but innovation came quickly. Malayalam poems grafted Sanskrit logic into folk diction. Jaathinirnayam demolishes caste with a Nyāya-style syllogism echoing Tirumūlar's 'one God, one race' refrain. Kundalinippāṭṭu fused Siddha snake-dance songs with the mysticism manifested in Yogakuṇḍalini Upaniṣad to frame the rising serpent draw the self-respect for a downtrodden people. Jananī Navaratnamañjarī staged the entire universe as a divine theatre, recalling Sanskrit pratīka imagery yet expanding it to include name–form, language itself, and modern objects.

Classical metres confer legitimacy: a nineteen-syllable Śārdūlavikrīḍita stanza can critique social tyranny while sounding orthodox enough for temple recitation. Rhetorical devices such as anaphora, alliteration and parallelism heighten chant-value, ensuring that verses lodge in collective memory. The Guru's linguistic synthesis, Sanskrit philosophical lexicon embedded in idiomatic Malayalam, democratized metaphysical content without diluting rigour.

Above all, poetry became a social praxis. By translating stotra motifs into a call for universal brotherhood, the Guru revise devotion itself: one was no longer needed to worship distant deities to escape the world but to recognise divinity in mutual respect, education and economic uplift. The unit that follows therefore examines specific parallels, structural borrowings and creative departures, inviting you to weigh how an ancient form can light a modern path.

Key themes

Stotra, Shankaracharya, Ashtakam, Nyāya, Kundalinī, Universalism, Sanskrit-Malayalam synthesis

Discussion

5.4.1 A Bridge Between Traditions

Sree Narayana Guru's poetry exhibits a profound engagement with India's classical Sanskrit devotional tradition, both in its spiritual vision and literary aesthetics. This influence is particularly visible in his Sanskrit stotras and Malayalam compositions that adopt Sanskritic style, metre, and diction. By drawing upon the deep well of classical Indian poetic forms, especially the works of Adi Shankaracharya, Guru both preserved and reimagined devotional expression. His works like *Daiva Dasakam*, *Shiva Shatakam*, and *Vinayaka Ashtakam* are

saturated with metaphysical insights and devotional fervour, showing clear links to Sanskrit stotra literature, which he absorbed deeply and rendered uniquely.

5.4.2 Vedic Foundations and the Rise of the Stotra Tradition

The roots of Sanskrit devotional poetry can be traced to the Vedic hymns, the *Rigveda* in particular, where the lyrical praise of cosmic forces blends poetic form with spiritual intent. Hymns praising Agni, Varuna, Ushas, and Indra highlight an early poetic awareness of the natural and the metaphysical. These stotras were not just ritual incantations but poetic expressions rich in imagery and metaphor. In Krishna Chaitanya's view, these hymns are 'bhavageethangal,' where devotional emotion and literary artistry converge.

Later Vedic texts like the *Samaveda* introduced musical elements, while the *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda* emphasized mantras and rituals. The Upaniṣads themselves, though philosophical, often function as hymns to the ultimate reality, Brahman. Over time, the stotra evolved into an independent literary form, as seen in the devotional and philosophical hymns that became widespread by the 7th century CE.

The Puranas further expanded this tradition, offering a rich trove of hymns such as *Shatanama Stotram*, *Sankata Vinashana Stotram*, and *Durga Stotram*. Philosophical hymns like those of Shankaracharya exemplify the confluence of metaphysical subtlety and poetic excellence.

5.4.3 Stotra Literature in Kerala: A Fertile Ground

Kerala's unique religious and cultural setting, with temples in every corner and a devout population, fostered an intense flowering of Sanskrit stotra literature. From anonymous chants to elaborate compositions, devotional poetry permeated every layer of cultural life. Texts like *Achyutashtakam*, *Chellurisa Stotram*, and *Muktisthalheshwari Stotram* are just a few examples of Kerala's rich stotra tradition.

Major figures like Sri Shankaracharya, Vilvamangalam Swamiyar, and Melpathur Narayana Bhattathiri transformed this tradition into a literary movement. Shankara, in particular, gave it philosophical depth, using the medium of poetic praise to convey Advaita Vedanta. His hymns transcend sectarian lines and appeal to universal devotion, offering a path of *sagunopasana* (worship with attributes) as a stepping stone to *nirgunopasana* (worship without attributes).

Melpathur's *Narayaneeyam* is a crowning jewel in this tradition, compressing the *Bhagavata Purana* into a hundred elegant cantos. His poetic devotion to Krishna stands as a timeless symbol of spiritual lyricism in Kerala.

5.4.4 Guru's Sanskrit Hymns: In the Shadow and Light of Shankara

Sree Narayana Guru's early Sanskrit stotras reflect a deep resonance with Shankaracharya's works. Compositions like *Vinayakashtakam*, *Vasudevashtakam*, and *Guhashtakam* follow the structural and stylistic conventions established by Adi Sankara. They often adopt the *ashtakam* form and mirror the metre and diction of classical models. For example, *Vinayakashtakam* closely resembles *Shivabhujangaprayatam*, while *Chidambarashtakam* echoes *Lingashtakam*.

It is to be understood that, these were

not mere imitations. Guru internalized the tradition, filtering it through his own spiritual lens. The Guhashtakam reminds one of Govindashtakam, but it is imbued with Guru's own poetic sensibility. This duality, of faithful adherence and creative transformation, defines his Sanskrit works.

The following verses exemplify this stylistic parallel:

അംബാഷ്ടകം - ശ്ലോകം 1

ചേടീഭവന്നിഖിലവേടി കദംബവന
വാടിഷു നാകിപടലി-
കോടീരചാരുതരകോടീ
മണീകിരണകോടീകരംബിതപദാ
പാടീരഗന്ധികുചശാടികവിത്വപരിപാടി
മഗാധിപസുതാ
ഘോടികുലാദധികധാടീമുദാരമുഖവീടീ
രസന തനുതാം.

നവമഞ്ജരി - ശ്ലോകം 1

നാടീടുമീവിഷയമോടീദൃശം
നടനമാടീടുവാനരുതിനി
ക്കാടീവയോവിതരതീടീയിടയ്ക്കിവനുകൂ
ടിയമായതിലും
കാടിയുമീകരണമൂടിയെരിപ്പതിനൊരേടീ
കരിഞ്ഞനിടില
ചൂടീദമീയമയിലോടീടുവാനരുൾക
മോടിയുതം മുരുകനേ

These verses illustrate both the metrical echo and Guru's unique voice. Vatakumkur observes these aspects in this remark: 'Guru's early Sanskrit hymns, though modeled on Sankara, possess genuine poetic merit'.

5.4.5 Guru's Poetic Form: Devotion, Detachment, and Liberation

Sanskrit devotional poetry, particularly that of Adi Shankaracharya, often revolves around the triad of bhakti (devotion), vairagya (detachment), and moksha (liberation). Guru draws from the same themes and re-articulates them in accessible Malayalam verse. His poem *Daiva Dasakam* is emblematic of surrender and divine guidance, echoing the path of *prapatti* (total surrender) in Sanskrit stotra tradition.

The lines:

നാവികൻ നീ, ഭവാബ്ധിക്കൊ-
രാവിവൻതോണി നിൻപദം

evoke the imagery of the devotee adrift in the ocean of worldly suffering, with the divine as the helmsman, a metaphor found in the *Yogakundaly* Upaniṣad (3.11):

'ഗുരുവാക്യസമാഭിന്നേ ബ്രഹ്മജ്ഞാനം
സ്ഫുടീഭവേത്
കർണ്ണധാരം ഗുരും പ്രാപ്യ കൃത്വാ
സൂക്ഷ്മം തരന്തി ച'

Guru's Malayalam compositions preserve this spiritual gravitas while situating them in a local poetic context. His Atmopadesa Śatakam, for instance, explores vairagya with precision. In verse 29, Guru writes:

'സുഖം ദുഃഖം വരുതിയും ശാന്തിയും
ഭവിച്ചു നാശം വരുന്നതാം പലപ്പോഴും
താൻ അവ വേദന കില്ലതാം പോലെ
ആകാശം വണ്ണം കറുപ്പതും വെളുപ്പതും'

The allegory of the sky and passing clouds reflects the impermanence of emotional experiences, a poetic rendering of the same insight found in *Vivekachudamani*.

Similarly, in verse 17, the classic Advaitic metaphor of the rope and snake is invoked:

'പാമ്പില്ല ഇതെക്കൊണ്ടവൻ ദൃക്സഞ്ചല-
നേമ്പാനിലാശങ്കയാൽ കയ്പമാകുന്നു
വെളിച്ചം വന്നു തടുത്തപ്പോൾ പാമ്പല്ല
കയ്പല്ല-അറിവേ അജ്ഞതയെ നീക്കുന്നു'

This verse mirrors the famous Vedantic principle: ignorance causes illusion, which is dispelled by knowledge, setting a parallel to Sankara's teachings.

Kundalini Imagery: Dance as Inner Awakening

Guru's *Kundalinippattu* draws directly from the mystical tradition of *Paampatti Siddhars*, incorporating both their rhythm and symbolic vision. The poetic form is akin to *Paampatti Chintam*. Though Guru's poem does not depict the literal yogic process, it vibrates with mystical vitality as in the lines:

ആടു പാമ്പേ പുനം തേടു പാമ്പേ അരു-
ളാനന്ദക്കൂത്തുകണ്ടാടു പാമ്പേ

Which resonate the verses from *Paampatti Siddhar* songs such as:

'തെളിന്തു തെളിന്തു തെളിർന്നാടു പാമ്പേ
ചിവൻ ചീർപാതം കണ്ടു തെളിന്താടു പാമ്പേ
ആടു പാമ്പേ തെളിന്താടു പാമ്പേ
ചിവൻ അടിയിനൈക്കണ്ടോമെൻറാടു പാമ്പേ'

These rhythmic structures are informed by the *Yoga Kundalini* Upaniṣad, which describes the awakening serpent energy.

While the imagery of the coiled snake reflects the yogic journey, Guru's *Kundalinippattu* also embodies a symbol of self-respect and liberation, as demonstrated in these striking lines:

ആയിരം കോടിയനന്തൻ നീയാനന-
മായിരവും തുറന്നാടു പാമ്പേ!
ഓമെന്നു തൊട്ടൊരു കോടി
മന്ത്രപ്പൊരുൾ
നാമെന്നറിഞ്ഞുകൊണ്ടാടു പാമ്പേ!

Here, the snake's cosmic dance becomes an assertion of the Self's divine identity, blending joy with spiritual awakening.

5.4.6 The World as Divine Performance

In *Jananeenavaratnamanjari*, Guru presents a dramatic and metaphysical vision of the universe as a cosmic play. His depiction goes beyond the living to include the entire spectrum of existence, animate, inanimate, symbolic, and linguistic. Consider the full poetic fragment:

മീനായതും ഭവതി മാനായതും ജനനി
നീ നാഗവും നഗഖഗം-
താനായതും ധര നദീ നാരിയും നരനു-
മാ നാകവും നരകവും
നീ നാമരൂപമതിൽ നാനാവിധപ്രകൃതി
മാനായി നിന്നറിയുമീ
ഞാനായതും ഭവതി ഹേ നാദരൂപിണിയ
ഹോ! നാടകം നിഖിലവും.

This concept recalls similar articulations from *Mathavilasam Prahasanam* and even Shakespeare's *As You Like It* ('All the world's a stage'). However, Guru's rendering is distinctly non-dual, seeing not just the world but language and *Nama-Rupa* (name-form) as integral players in the divine drama.

5.4.7 Metres, Figures of Speech, and Musicality

The influence of Sanskrit devotional poetry is also embedded in Guru's formal poetic elements, metres (vrttas), rhetorical techniques (alankaras), and musical phrasing. In his Sanskrit works like *Shiva Shatakam*, *Vinayaka Ashtakam*, and *Subrahmanya Ashtakam*, Guru adopts the symmetry and elegance of classical Sanskrit metres, particularly Shardula Vikridita and Anushtup. These metres are not chosen arbitrarily but serve to intensify the lyrical and spiritual resonance of his hymns.

Guru's use of anaphora, alliteration, and parallelism draws directly from Sanskritic stylistics. In *Daiva Dasakam*, the repeating invocations generate a meditative rhythm:

നാവികൻ നീ, ഭവാബ്ധിക്കൊ-
രാവിവൻതോണി നിൻപദം

Such repetition, both in meaning and structure, mirrors the stylistic intensity

found in works like *Bhaja Govindam*. These formal devices aren't ornamental; they help the poet evoke emotion, maintain rhythm, and enhance memorability; the key traits of stotra literature.

Musicality is another dimension where Guru's compositions excel. Whether written in Sanskrit or Malayalam, his poems exhibit a cadence suitable for chanting, meditation, or communal recitation. This is not incidental but an intentional continuation of the Sanskrit bhakti tradition where poetry is conceived as the prayer and song.

5.4.8 Sanskrit in Malayalam Poetic Framework

One of Guru's most striking contributions is the synthesis of Sanskrit philosophical terminology with Malayalam poetic sensibility. His poems frequently employ Sanskrit-derived terms, *Atman*, *Maya*, *Jnana*, *Brahman*, within fluid Malayalam syntax. Unlike mechanical borrowing, these terms are integrated organically, retaining their philosophical depth while enhancing accessibility.

In Atmopadesa Śatakam, Guru handles compound expressions and Advaitic imagery with clarity. Consider verse 64:

'അകത്തുള്ളതൊരുവിശ്വം
പുറത്തുള്ളതാകുന്നു
മനസ്സുതർക്കത്തെ ശുദ്ധി
വരുത്തുമെങ്കിൽ ശുദ്ധമാകുന്നു ലോകം'

Here, the philosophical idea of subjective transformation shaping objective reality is rendered in simple yet profound Malayalam. The rhythm and clarity showcase how Malayalam can carry the weight of Sanskrit metaphysics without compromising poetic elegance.

Guru's Malayalam compositions were often accompanied by commentaries or interpretations, enabling scholars and common people alike to engage with his work. This dual-language strategy also reflects his inclusive pedagogy, bridging scriptural wisdom with social accessibility.

5.4.9 Poetry as Social Philosophy: The Logic of Oneness in Jaathinirnayam

Guru's genius lay in using poetry as a medium of philosophical and social reform. Nowhere is this clearer than in *Jaathinirnayam*, composed in 1914,where a poetic declaration is made by the Guru against caste distinctions. These lines are not emotional protests but logical demolitions of caste-based identity, framed through classical syllogistic reasoning:

മനുഷ്യാണാം മനുഷ്യത്വം
ജാതിർ ഗോത്വം ഗവാം യഥാ
ന ബ്രാഹ്മണാദിരസ്തീവം
ഹാ! തത്ത്വം വേത്തി കോപി ന

Here, Guru makes a brilliant analogy: just as *Gotvam* (cowness) is the universal attribute of cows, *Manushyatvam* (humanity) is the essence of all humans. Thus, any claim of caste-specific difference is intellectually invalid. This mirrors the logical clarity of Nyaya and Vedanta traditions, but is repurposed by Guru to dismantle caste oppression.

The famous stanza:

ഒരു ജാതി ഒരു മതം
ഒരു ദൈവം മനുഷ്യന്
ഒരു യോനിയൊരാകാം
മറു ഭേദവുമില്ലതിൽ

resonates with Tamil saint Tirumular's *Tirumantram*:

'ഒന്റേ കുലവും ഒരുവനേ തേവനും
നന്റേ നിനൈമിൻ നമനില്ലൈ നാണാമേ'

To conclude, Guru's composition emerges not from sectarian devotion but from a secular ethical philosophy, expressing spiritual and human equality in a form meant to reach the masses, irrespective of their priviledged or under priviledged status Sree Narayana Guru's engagement with Sanskrit devotional poetry is neither slavish imitation nor radical rupture. It is a dialogical process, he absorbs, reflects, and then re-articulates. His early Sanskrit stotras show deep reverence for Sankaracharya's works, yet they shine with originality and clarity. His Malayalam verses transform classical philosophical imagery, like the nautical metaphor, the snake-dance of Kundalini, or the cosmic theatre, into fresh, locally grounded spiritual insight.

Even when he imitates traditional forms like Ashtakam, his voice remains distinctive, combining rhythmic elegance with Advaitic depth. By integrating Sanskrit aesthetics into Malayalam, Guru preserves the gravitas of classical thought while ensuring its ethical, philosophical, and poetic accessibility. His verses endure not merely as devotional chants but as tools for liberation, intellectual, spiritual, and social. In short, he addressed the social evils in the language of the Brahmanical hegemony to shake the foundations of their privileges in the society segregated by caste-race-faith distinctions.

Recap

- Vedic hymns → Purāṇic hymns → Shankara → Kerala stotra boom
- Kerala temples fostered Sanskrit chant culture
- Melpathur's Narayaneeyam a local model
- Guru's early Sanskrit hymns echo Shankara form
- Vinayakaṣṭakam, Vasudevāṣṭakam examples
- Creative local imagery inside classical shell
- Ashtakam metre ensures mnemonic power
- Malayalam poems absorb Sanskrit logic
- Jaathinirnayam uses Nyāya analogy (cowness)
- Kundalinippāṭṭu blends Siddha & Upaniṣad lore
- Steam-launch feet modernise boat metaphor

- Jananī Navaratnamanjari stages cosmic theatre
- Figures of speech preserve bhakti fervour
- Anaphora and alliteration aid chanting
- Śārdūlavikrīḍita grants authority to reformist lines
- Sanskrit lexicon in vernacular syntax = inclusivity
- Bhakti, vairāgya, mokṣa triad reframed socially
- Poetry as praxis: education, caste reform
- One God, one humanity slogan echoes stotra spirit
- Critics note 'faithful yet original' stance
- Language of devotion turned into secular ethics
- Formal devices never ornamental only
- Ancient metres legitimise modern ideas
- Guru shows tradition can empower progress
- Dialogue, not rupture, with Sanskrit heritage

Objective Questions

1. Which Sanskrit poet did most strongly influence Guru's early stotras?
2. Which masterpiece in Kerala tradition condenses the Bhāgavata Purāṇa into 100 cantos?
3. Name the Guru's poem that presents the universe as divine drama.
4. Which logical school underlies the cow-caste analogy in Jaathinirnayam?
5. What is the stotra form with eight stanzas is called ?
6. Which Upaniṣad feeds Kundalinippāṭṭu imagery?
7. Give one triad common to Shankara and Guru (bhakti, _____, mokṣa).

8. Identify the nineteen-syllable metre granting the majestic tone.
9. What social slogan does distil the Guru's universalism?
10. Which poetic device of repetition does strengthen chant-value in Daiva Daśakam?

Answers

1. Adi Shankaracharya
2. Narayaneeyam
3. Jananī Navaratnamanjari
4. Nyāya
5. Ashtakam
6. Yoga Kuṇḍalinī Upaniṣad
7. Vairāgya
8. Śārdūlavikrīḍita
9. 'One caste, one religion, one God for man'
10. Anaphora

Assignments

1. Compare the apprenticeship-imitation phase of Guru's Sanskrit hymns with his later Malayalam innovations.
2. Assess how classical metres bestow cultural authority on socially radical ideas in Guru's poetry.
3. Trace the development of the boat-voyage metaphor from Vedic hymns to Daiva Daśakam, noting modern inflections.
4. Discuss the logical structure of Jaathinirnayam and its effectiveness in dismantling caste ideology.
5. 'Guru's poems are stotras in intention, manifestos in effect.' Evaluate with close textual analysis.
6. Explore possibilities for re-animating Sanskrit stotra devices in contemporary social-justice poetry.

The Literary Legacy of Narayanaguru

SGOU

BLOCK - 6

UNIT 1

Influence of Guru in Malayalam Literature

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- explain caste barriers shaping Malayalam literature before Sree Narayana Guru.
- analyse Guru's efforts opening education to marginalised caste communities.
- identify three lower-caste writers and summarise their key contributions.
- evaluate thematic shifts towards equality, humanism, universalism in Guru-influenced literature.

Prerequisites

The literary landscape of pre-modern Kerala was shaped almost entirely by upper-caste elites, especially Brahmins, most notably the Namboothiris. Literature and learning were seen as sacred domains, closely tied to caste-based privilege and religious orthodoxy. For the avarna (lower-caste) communities, who made up the majority of the population, education and literary expression were largely forbidden. Literacy remained the privilege of a few, with formal learning supported by royal and noble patronage, both out of reach for the marginalised.

Ezhavas, the caste into which Sree Narayana Guru was born, faced severe social restrictions. The rule that an Ezhava should keep a distance of sixty-four feet from

a Brahmin illustrates the exclusion from the literary culture of that time. While subaltern communities nurtured rich oral traditions, such as Kaikottikkalippattu and Onappaattu, these were excluded from the written canon, dismissed as folk forms lacking literary merit. Until the late nineteenth century, Malayalam literature records almost no contributions from these communities.

However, the final decades of the nineteenth century brought major social changes. Missionary efforts and government-run schools introduced basic modern education beyond the Brahmin caste. Although English education initially benefited progressive Nair families, it gradually extended more widely. This slow but significant spread of knowledge offered new opportunities for historically marginalised groups.

It was in this changing social context that Sree Narayana Guru emerged. His commitment to learning, especially in Sanskrit and Malayalam, marked a bold challenge to caste-based limits. Guru's decision to receive training from respected teachers like Raman Pillai Asan, along with fellow Ezhava aspirants such as Velutheri Kesavan Vaidyar and Perunnelli Krishnan Vaidyan, was ground-breaking. Although they were first made to sit at the edge of the classroom, these students eventually accessed the full curriculum, breaking through barriers that had long kept them excluded.

Guru's entry into literary and philosophical life was not just a personal journey but part of a wider structural change. The rise of lower-caste scholars with the ability to match the intellectual skills of the upper castes marked a turning point in Malayalam literary history. As Dr K. Prasobhan notes, this development challenged the long-held monopoly of high-caste elites and helped build a more inclusive literary tradition.

This early phase - marked by oppression, exclusion, resistance and reform - provides the necessary background for understanding the transformative role of Sree Narayana Guru in Malayalam literature. His impact went beyond poetry or philosophy. He helped redefine what was possible for literature itself, opening it to voices once silenced.

Key themes

Sree Narayana Guru, Caste Reform, Access to Education, Lower-Caste Writers, Malayalam Renaissance, Sanskrit Learning, Spiritual Humanism

Discussion

61.1 Lower-Caste Entry into the Realm of Poetry: A Historical Reflection

Literary culture has traditionally thrived among the educated elite. In Kerala's early history, education and scholarship were largely monopolised by the Namboothiris, guardians of *Sanatana Dharma*, who revered literacy as sacred, on par with religion. To consolidate their dominance in Kerala, however, they made several strategic concessions. One such compromise involved accommodating the Nairs, who served them in both practical and intimate capacities. Another was the cultural transformation of Dravidian Kerala into an Aryanised space.

By the 15th century, this Brahminical "generosity" facilitated the emergence of poets and artists from the Shudra castes who could rival the Namboothiris in literary accomplishment. These upper-caste non-Brahmin poets nonetheless maintained deep reverence for Brahmins, grateful for their patronage, a sentiment that continued well into the 20th century. Even A.R. Rajarajavarma, the author of *Malayavilasam* and a founding figure of modern Malayalam poetry, considered criticism of Brahmins sacrilegious.

In stark contrast, Kerala's lower castes, the Avarna, were denied such educational generosity. For an Ezhava, who by custom could not approach a Brahmin within sixty-four feet, the transmission of knowledge was unthinkable. Other "untouchable" castes fared even worse. With the Nairs also maintaining caste boundaries against the Ezhavas and similar communities, opportunities for formal education or mentorship were nearly nonexistent.

Despite constituting more than half the population, the lower castes are conspicuously absent in the literary record. Mainstream literature, crafted by and for the upper castes, offers no acknowledgment of their existence. Even Kunchan Nambiar, known for his satirical jabs at toddy-drinking Nairs, chose silence when it came to the Ezhavas who produced and sold that toddy.

Until this point, the majority of these upper-caste students had been educated in traditional ഗുരുകുലങ്ങൾ (gurukulas). These centres of learning focused primarily on Sanskrit literature and poetics, training in poetic composition in both Sanskrit and Malayalam, and performance arts such as കഥകളി (Kathakali) and തുള്ളൽ (Thullal). Martial disciplines like കളരിപ്പയറ്റ് (Kalarippayattu) were also part of the curriculum.

However, with the spread of modern education, the gurukula system began to decline. Understandably, Nair students were inclined to abandon the old system - which demanded considerable time, financial resources, and physical commitment - in favour of the more practical and accessible government schools. As a result, several prestigious gurukulas fell into disuse, and many teachers (ആചാര്യൻമാർ) lost their livelihoods, either partially or entirely. This crisis compelled upper-caste instructors to adapt their practices in minor, but significant, ways.

Across Kerala, numerous lower-caste children were eager to receive an education but found themselves barred from enrolling in the newly opened government

schools, despite some belonging to financially stable households. Gradually, the aforementioned upper-caste teachers extended their so-called "generosity" to include elite Ezhava families that showed a keen interest in education. As the gurukulas emptied out, these teachers began admitting wealthy and capable Ezhava students.

Initially, these students were made to sit outside the training hall (കളരി), later being allowed to occupy the back rows. While this inclusion might appear to stem from progressive or altruistic motives, one cannot ignore the underlying financial incentive. For many lower-caste families who valued education but lacked affluence, access to these gurukulas remained unattainable. It is perhaps with this disheartening reality in mind that Kumaran Asan penned his poignant work, A Tiyya Boy's Thought (ഒരു തീയക്കുട്ടിയുടെ വിചാരം).

വിദ്വാനു പണ്ടിഹ ദരിദ്രതയിന്നു പാരിൽ
വിദ്യാവിഹീനനതു വന്നു വിരോധമില്ല
വിദ്യയ്ക്കു പണ്ടു വില വാങ്ങുകയില്ലയിപ്പോ-
ളുദ്യുക്തനും ധനമൊഴിഞ്ഞതു കിട്ടുകില്ല

Due to these circumstances, only affluent Ezhavas initially had access to traditional educational opportunities. Nevertheless, these students became exposed to a literary and scholarly tradition that had long remained inaccessible to the lower castes. It was likely during this period that they first gained the opportunity to explore the classical arts and literature of feudal Kerala.

Although a handful had acquired limited knowledge of Sanskrit earlier, the lower castes now began receiving more formal instruction in Sanskrit learning, poetic composition, and classical art forms such as Kathakali (കഥകളി) and Thullal (തുള്ളൽ). In this way, a new, albeit still traditional, realm opened up to them. Many students displayed remarkable aptitude in these disciplines and achieved significant levels of scholarship and artistic mastery.

Several Ezhava graduates from the gurukulas (ഗുരുകുലങ്ങൾ) returned to their own communities and founded schools, sharing the knowledge they had acquired. Soon, scholars, poets, and performers emerged from the lower castes, capable of standing shoulder to shoulder with their upper-caste counterparts.

This shift played a crucial role in transforming the psyche of the lower castes - helping them move from a condition of a sense of inferiority to one of self-confidence. Many lower-caste leaders who would later become key figures in Kerala's renaissance were nurtured by this unique socio-educational environment.

6.1.2 Guru's Role in the Democratisation of Education

Sree Narayana Guru emerged as both a spiritual leader and a social reformer who united communities by opening the doors of education to all. It is recorded that young lower-caste men such as Velutheri Kesavan Vaidyar and Perunnelli Krishnan Vaidyan were able to study under renowned teachers, like Raman Pillai Asan, with the support of Guru, at a time when such opportunities were nearly unimaginable for individuals from their caste background.

Guru's contribution to educational upliftment was twofold. Firstly, by pursuing education himself despite rigid caste restrictions, he set a powerful personal example. Secondly, through the establishment of educational institutions and the promotion of initiatives - such as the schools affiliated with the S.N.D.P. Yogam, SNV Samajam, and others - he

opened new pathways for marginalised communities to access learning and personal development. He also actively supported movements advocating for the admission of outcaste children into the public education system.

6.1.3 Opening the Literary Mainstream to the Marginalised

As a result of these changes, pioneers from the *avarna* communities began to make their way into Malayalam literary mainstream. Notably, Velutheri Kesavan Vaidyar and Perunnelli Krishnan Vaidyan emerged as scholars and authors who broke new ground. Guru's closest disciple, Kumaran Asan, would go on to become one of the great modern poets of Malayalam. Their achievements marked the collapse of caste-based monopolies in literature.

More significantly, Sree Narayana Guru's rising influence gave writers from oppressed communities the confidence to embrace their own literary voices. He became the inspiration behind a quiet renaissance in education and literature among the Ezhavas and other lower castes. One of his greatest influences was on Kumaran Asan, who stayed close to him for nearly twenty years. Recognising Asan's talent, Guru encouraged him to use poetry as a tool for social reform and spiritual reflection. Under Guru's guidance, Asan developed a unique poetic style that combined lyrical beauty with the ideals of equality, compassion and spiritual exploration. Asan's emergence as a major literary figure is, in itself, a tribute to Guru's impact on Malayalam literature. Guru not only influenced Asan's themes but also supported him materially and morally, even sending the young poet to Bengal to study Sanskrit and refine his craft.

Sree Narayana Guru's influence on Malayalam literature, especially through Kumaran Asan, was both visible and subtle. On one hand, there are direct tributes in the form of hymns, birthday verses and dedicatory poems. On the other hand, there is a deeper influence seen in Asan's philosophical growth and literary evolution. Beginning with "Veena Poovu", his shorter works embody the spiritual and social ideals inspired by the Guru. These poems represent a thoughtful blend of cultural depth and reformist vision, showing how deeply Guru's ideas shaped Asan's literary and ethical worldview.

By the early twentieth century, the decline of Brahmin dominance in literature created space for marginalised voices to emerge. Many of these writers had either been inspired by Guru or shaped by the larger social awakening he sparked. Pandit K.P. Karuppan, a Dalit poet and playwright, although not a direct disciple of Guru, reflected the spirit of reform in his writings. A rare royal initiative allowed him to receive an education, and he boldly critiqued the caste system through poems such as "Jati Kummi," echoing Guru's message of equality.

Muloor S. Padmanabha Panicker, an Ezhava poet and reformer, also played a key role. Though not directly taught by Guru, he was close to other reformers like Chattampi Swamikal and shared Guru's ideals. In literary works such as *Kavi Ramayanam*, Muloor creatively gave voice to lower-caste perspectives within classical forms, challenging literary traditions shaped by caste exclusion.

By the 1920s, the presence of non-Brahmin writers in Malayalam literature had become irreversible. Authors such as C.V. Kunhiraman openly credited Guru for this transformation. In one of

his poems, Kunhiraman compared Guru to a miraculous surgeon healing Kerala's social wounds and marvelled at how someone once labelled "untouchable" had become a revered spiritual and intellectual leader. Guru's peaceful revolution gave expression to the once silenced, opening the literary world to a broader and more inclusive human experience.

6.1.4 Shared Roots and Literary Awakening

Sree Narayana Guru, Velutheri Kesavan Vaidyar, and Perunnelli Krishnan Vaidyan were, interestingly, classmates in their youth, having studied under the same teacher. This detail highlights how Guru's educational journey was closely connected with other pioneering lower-caste figures.

Beyond the educational opportunities, favourable historical developments also created an environment for change. The spread of missionary schools and the rise of early social reform movements helped open new paths. However, it was Guru's personal leadership and message that truly inspired a generation of new writers and thinkers from marginalised communities.

Among the early poets published in *Malayalam Manorama*, a newspaper founded by Varghese Mappila in 1890, there were at least four Ezhava poets from lower-caste backgrounds. These included P.K. Krishnan Vaidyar, Paravoor Kesavan Ashan, Muloor S. Padmanabha Panicker, and K.C Kunjan Vaidyar.

Shortly thereafter, Paravoor Kesavan Ashan, who was both educated and financially secure, invested ten thousand rupees to publish a weekly newspaper named *Sujananandini* in 1892. This paper welcomed contributions from all writers, regardless of caste. It offered Ezhavas and other lower-caste poets an opportunity to show that poetic skill was neither reserved for nor inherent to the upper castes. It also allowed readers to enjoy poetry in print without the barrier of caste considerations. As noted earlier, Velutheri Kesavan Vaidyar and Perunnelli Krishnan Vaidyan benefitted greatly from Guru's mentorship, and both became respected intellectual figures.

Ulloor S. Parameswara Iyer, the historian, once wrote: "The literary movements of Velutheri Kesavan Vaidyar and Perunnelli Krishnan Vaidyan were like twin streams carrying the waters of Guru's teachings into Kerala's literary soil." Their notable achievement was their ability to embody both literary excellence and a spirit of social awareness in their writings.

6.1.5 Velutheri Kesavan Vaidyar's Intellectual Journey

Velutheri Kesavan Vaidyar (1858–1897) was one of the earliest and most distinguished Ezhava poets to earn literary acclaim in Malayalam. He was born into a respected Ezhava family in Travancore, known for its rare commitment to Sanskrit learning and the practice of Ayurveda. This privileged cultural setting allowed him to begin his early education in reading, writing, astrology, and traditional knowledge within his own household.

His formal literary training began when he became a disciple of Kummampalli Raman Pillai Ashan, a renowned teacher of the *gurukula* system. Here, Velutheri followed a comprehensive curriculum that included poetry, drama, rhetoric, prosody, and the Ayurvedic classic Ashtanga Hridayam. His fellow students included Sree Narayana Guru and Perunnelli Krishnan Vaidyan, both of whom would later become towering figures in Kerala's intellectual life. Through this rare access

to Brahminical instruction, Velutheri received an education on par with that of the upper-caste scholars of his time.

During this period of study, Velutheri lived with the Varanappalli household, a distinguished Ezhava family that actively promoted literature and the arts. The home functioned as a cultural hub, encouraging creativity through regular activities like poetry and verse-letter competitions, Kathakali training, and lively literary discussions. It might be described as a miniature version of the Kodungallur palace- a rare space for intellectual stimulation for lower-caste students excluded from elite literary circles.

This blend of disciplined scholarship and vibrant cultural exposure helped Velutheri return home in 1882 as a confident and well-rounded poet. Even after completing his formal studies, his desire for knowledge continued. He went on to study with several prominent upper-caste scholars and gained deep expertise in areas such as grammar, *Vedanta*, *yoga*, and the physical disciplines.

Despite his untimely death at the age of thirty-nine, Velutheri left behind an impressive body of work that spanned multiple literary genres. His contributions included *Vanchippattu* (boat songs), *Attakatha* (Kathakali plays), poetic letters, message poems (*sandesha kavyam*), devotional hymns, and translations from Sanskrit. Among his original works were *Balisugreeva Sambhavam*, *Sundopasundam* and *Tilottama Vijayam* (both *Attakatha*), *Guhananda Shatakam*, *Suhrid Sandesha Shatakam*, *Vanchirajavamsa Charitam*, *Rati Rahasyam*, and several others. Velutheri demonstrated a deep familiarity with elite literary traditions, modelling his style after upper-caste poets such as Unnayi Warrier and Iriyamman Thampi. His *Attakatha*, for instance, display a mastery of both the structural elements and performative aspects of classical theatre. Similarly, his *Vanchippattu* composition *Balisugreeva Sambhavam* showcases lyrical fluency and strong narrative rhythm.

Although his writings followed the dominant literary practices of his era, Velutheri also displayed originality and depth in specific areas. A notable example is his treatise *Arthalankara Manipravalam*, a critical study on poetic aesthetics published in the literary journal *Vidyavilasini*. At a time when poetry was often seen as a refined form of entertainment, this work provided a systematic discussion of literary theory and ornamentation. It received high praise from Vishakham Thirunal Maharaja, who awarded Velutheri the prestigious *Veerasrunkhala*, the highest honour then bestowed upon a Malayalam poet. Importantly, Velutheri may have been the first lower-caste poet in Malayalam history to receive such royal recognition. His early engagement with aesthetics even predates A.R. Rajarajavarma's more widely acknowledged contributions, revealing Velutheri's insightful grasp of literary criticism.

Velutheri also worked as a translator, striving to enrich Malayalam literature by making classical Sanskrit texts more accessible. His translations included *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*, *Prasanna Raghavam*, *Saura Puranam*, *Hitopadesha*, and *Ashtanga Hridayam*. Of particular interest is his version of *Shakuntalam*, which he completed before learning that Kerala Varma Valiya Koil Thampuran intended to undertake the same project. Out of respect for the Thampuran's stature, Velutheri chose not to publish his version - an act that reveals his characteristic humility and

cultural tact. In addition, he composed *Balapathāmṛtam*, a Malayalam text written in aphoristic style to support beginners studying the *Paniniyam*, the authoritative grammar of Sanskrit. These initiatives reflect his sincere and progressive efforts to democratise access to classical knowledge.

Velutheri's relationship with Sree Narayana Guru adds a profoundly personal and intellectual layer to his legacy. They were contemporaries, studied under the same teacher, and for a time lived together in the same household. Although Velutheri passed away before Guru rose to prominence as a transformative figure, his admiration and affection for his classmate were unmistakable. In one verse composed in honour of the Guru, he wrote: "ശ്രീനാരായണ ദേശിക യതിവരചരമാ രവിന്ദമകരന്ദം മാമകമാനസ മധുകര വിഹര സമാസ്വാദ്യ വിശ്രമപ്രസരം" a metaphor that invites his own mind to find rest in the spiritual sweetness of the Guru's lotus feet. Guru, in turn, recognised Velutheri's poetic stature with playful affection. When Velutheri was likened to the heroic character Bali in Mooloor's Kavi Ramayanam, Guru remarked: "ബാലിയല്ലേ? ബാലി തന്നെ, വാലി ല്ലെന്നേയുള്ളൂ" ("Isn't he Bali? Indeed Bali, just without the tail"), revealing the warmth and camaraderie shared between them.

While Velutheri did not set out to reject the dominant literary tradition, his true achievement lies in proving that someone from the Ayittha caste could participate meaningfully and earn respect within that tradition. He was not a radical reformer but a cultured inheritor of classical forms who secured his place through merit and mastery. In doing so, he laid the foundation for future generations of avarna writers to claim their literary voice with dignity and assurance. Velutheri Kesavan Vaidyar's life and work reflect a crucial moment of transition in Malayalam literature, when caste barriers were being quietly questioned and when figures like Sree Narayana Guru were reshaping Kerala's cultural and moral vision.

Perunnelli Krishnan Vaidyan (1863–1894), when compared with his contemporary Velutheri Kesavan Vaidyar, led a more publicly visible and influential literary life. His poetry, known for its emotional intensity and stylistic clarity, strongly resonated with the popular imagination of the time. As a key figure in the southern spread of the Venmani school of poetry, his writings appealed to ordinary readers who connected with his blend of earthy sensuality, humour, and everyday themes. Perunnelli excelled in widely appreciated forms such as poetic letters, erotic songs, and satirical verse duels, often published in local newspapers. His ease of expression reflected public taste, and his poetry aligned more with real-life experiences than with isolated scholastic tradition.

Born into the ancient Ezhava family of Perunnelli in Muttathara, near Thiruvananthapuram, Krishnan Vaidyan began his education under Raman Pillai Ashan of Pettah. Like many Ezhava youths of the period, he was denied entry into state-run schools and instead pursued higher learning through the gurukula system. He studied alongside Sree Narayana Guru and Velutheri Kesavan Vaidyar under the celebrated teacher Kummampallil Raman Pillai Ashan. He later studied grammar under Kadayam Nanushastrikal and Ayurvedic medicine under Ananthapurathu Mootha Koyi Thampuran, elder brother of Kerala Varma Valiya Koil Thampuran. Krishnan Vaidyan earned respect not only as a poet but also as a physician and teacher. His promising career was tragically cut short when he passed away at the age of thirty-one.

As a poet, Perunnelli actively engaged with the dominant literary forms of his time. His creative work included *ammanappattukal* (swing songs), *maranpattukal* (erotic songs), plays, *attakkathakal* (Kathakali dramas), and devotional verses. Like Velutheri, he received formal recognition for his literary achievements. In 1892, he competed in a drama contest organised by the *Kavisamaja* in Kottayam, winning a certificate of merit for his play *Subhadraharanam*. He also received honours in the *Ghadikavimshati* and *Kavitachathura Pareeksha* examinations. These acknowledgements marked an important turning point in Malayalam literary culture, showing that caste was no longer an absolute barrier to artistic excellence. *Kunjikuttan Thampuran*, reacting to this shift, wrote to a friend: "Oh! I forgot the Tiyyan named Vaidyan Krishna has matched hands with us in this matter and succeeded!" This remark reveals both the lingering condescension and the reluctant admiration that Perunnelli evoked among his upper-caste contemporaries.

Subhadraharanam was widely performed across the region, with Perunnelli himself playing the lead role. Ulloor noted that there were few young men in Thiruvananthapuram who had not memorised parts of the play, a sign of its broad popularity. Another successful play, *Bhageeratha*, added to his growing reputation. Even as a teenager, Perunnelli showed remarkable talent; at the age of sixteen, he composed the swing song *Kachacharitham*, which captivated women audiences. Later, at the request of a woman named *Ittiyamma* from *Anchuthengu*, he composed *Ushakalyanam* in just one day. His *Kathakali* play *Kukutsuvijayam* also played a vital part in supporting the *Ezhava Kathakali* troupes of the time.

Peunnelli's literary reputation was strengthened further by his bold and witty participation in public literary debates, particularly through poetic letters exchanged with figures such as Kunjikuttan Thampuran, Valiya Koyi Thampuran, and Chattampi Swamikal. Writing under pseudonyms, Perunnelli questioned poetic authority and caste superiority in newspapers and journals, free from the obligation of caste-imposed humility. In one such piece, published under the name Seyid Muhammad, he offered a satirical critique of the elitist posture of Kottarathil Sankunni:

'മണ്ണും വിണ്ണുമൊരേകണക്കു പുകഴും
പേരാണ്ട'തുണ്ടത്തി'യോ-
ടെണ്ണിക്കൊഞ്ഞ പറഞ്ഞണഞ്ഞ വിരുതൻ
കൊട്ടാരവും കൂട്ടരും
നണ്ണിക്കൊള്ളുവിനിന്നിമേലിതു കണ-
ക്കാരോടു മാകാത്തതെ-
ന്നണ്ണാർക്കണ്ണനൊരാനയോടു സദൃശം
വക്തം പിടർന്നീടുമോ.''

These sharp poetic exchanges illustrate how Perunnelli used verse to challenge caste hierarchy with elegance and irony.

Perunnelli and Velutheri shared a close companionship with Chattampi Swamikal, who was already recognised as a yogi at the time. The three often composed poems together, setting aside caste differences through their shared love of poetry. Reflecting on the loss of his friends, Chattampi Swamikal later remarked, "Kittan (Krishnan Vaidyan) and Kesavan were my two wings. Since losing those two wings, I no longer dress as a poet and fly." This touching statement reveals not only the depth of their friendship but also the collective creative energy they embodied.

Beyond his more vibrant and performative compositions, Perunnelli also contributed to literary theory and criticism. While *Velutheri* wrote *Arthalankara Manipravalam*, Perunnelli composed

Padadosha Prakaranam, a concise work on errors in poetic expression. He defines the category of *nirarthaka dosham* (semantic redundancy or meaninglessness) and illustrates it with examples such as:

Definition:"പാദം തികപ്പതിനു വല്ല പദങ്ങളെച്ചേർത്തോതുന്നതാണ് കളവാണി നിരർഥദോഷം."

Example: "പാഥോജ പുഷ്പതു കൊണ്ടു ചമച്ചതൽപം ചേതോജ കേളിയതി ലെത്ര സുഖം തരുന്നു."

In this example, he explains that the use of "അത്" is superfluous and detracts from the poem's clarity. His close attention to poetic structure and clarity shows that, despite his popular appeal, Perunnelli remained committed to the discipline and integrity of poetic composition.

What set Perunnelli apart most distinctly was his artistic treatment of sensuality. While the Venmani poets had captured the northern imagination with their simplicity and suggestive elegance, southern Kerala remained tied to the more ornate and formal Manipravalam tradition. In this context, Perunnelli played a bridging role. Literary historian Ulloor observed that Krishnan Vaidyan was the first major poet from southern Travancore to adopt the style of the Venmani poets, especially that of Venmani Mahan. His poetry echoed the Venmani mode with clever wordplay, tight rhyme, vivid imagery, and occasional erotic exuberance. Works like Kokokam Manipravalam [കൊക്കോകം മണിപ്രവാളം] and Puthenmaran Pattu [പുത്തൻമാരൻ പാട്ട്] earned him the title Śṛṅgāra Raṅgādhipan [ശൃംഗാര രംഗാധിപൻ]-Master of the Erotic Realm.

The conclusions drawn about Velutheri apply equally to Perunnelli. Both were firmly grounded in the literary traditions of their era. They imitated upper-caste forms with finesse while subtly undermining their exclusive nature. That Perunnelli could compete with elite poets and receive formal recognition was remarkable for someone from a caste that was once required to maintain physical distance in public spaces. His success proved that literary excellence could surpass social barriers, even if his personal views remained influenced by the feudal and conservative values of his time. Nevertheless, by rising to literary prominence, Perunnelli helped shape a new cultural space where *avarna* voices could express themselves with dignity, creativity, and artistic honour.

6.1.6 Paravoor Keshavan Ashan

K.C.Kesava Pillai, widely regarded as the most distinguished poet to follow the eminent poetic trinity of the previous generation, paid tribute to his lower-caste guru, Keshavan Ashan, in verse:

ചൊൽപ്പൊങ്ങും വൈദ്യശാസ്ത്രം ഗണിതവു മതുപോൽ സാഹിതീശാസ്ത്രവുംകൊണ്ടെപ്പേർക്കും മോദമേകും മമഗുരു വിലസീടുന്നിതേ കേശവാഖ്യൻ.

("Equally skilled in eloquence, medical science, and mathematics, as well as the science of literature, my guru Keshavan, who brought joy to all, shines here.")

In the rigidly hierarchical caste context of the nineteenth century, such praise from a prominent Nair poet for an Ezhava scholar was both rare and historically significant. Given Keshavan Ashan's scholarship and standing, there is little doubt that he was the most eminent teacher available to Kesava Pillai in his native Kollam.

Born in 1859 in Paravoor, in present-day Kollam district, Paravoor Keshavan Ashan came from a prosperous and

socially respected Ezhava family. Fortunate to have both financial resources and intellectual ambition, he secured the opportunity to study under upper-caste scholars, an unusual privilege for someone of his background. After his initial education within the community, he studied Sanskrit with Krishnapillai of Puthukattu Madam [പുതുക്കാട്ടുമഠം] in Chavara, later advancing under Ilathoor Ramashastrikal, one of Kerala's most esteemed scholars.

After completing his formal education, Ashan took an enterprising and forward-thinking step by entering the field of journalism. Like Varughese Mappila, who founded Malayala Manorama, Ashan established Sujananandini, which was printed at his own press, Kerala Bhushanam. Sujananandini offered sections for poetry, riddles, and literary debates. For many lower-caste writers who were denied access to upper-caste-dominated publications, the journal provided an essential platform. As Ulloor noted, this initiative benefited both the wider Travancore public and the Ezhava community in particular.

Ashan's public life was far-reaching. He was one of the few figures of his time who made a lasting impression throughout Kerala. His contemporary Azhakathu Padmanabha Kurup once remarked: "If one were to ask whether Ashan was a grammarian, logician, astrologer, physician, scientist, poet, or editor, the answer would be simple: he was all of these."

This intellectual breadth was accompanied by an impressive network of disciples.

Ashan was also actively involved in the early cultural movements associated with Sree Narayana Guru. He transformed Sujananandini into a symbol of pride and self-respect for the rising avarna classes. His editorial boldness attracted conservative backlash, and the newspaper office was once set on fire in protest. After a dynamic and influential life, Ashan passed away in 1916.

Though much of his time was devoted to social and political causes, Ashan made occasional contributions to literature. Most of his writings were in the field of Ayurveda. His *Sarachandrika*, a commentary on *Mādhava Nidāna*, holds importance in medical literature. He also published *Vaidya Saṅgraham*, another Ayurvedic text with commentary.

As a poet, Ashan largely adhered to classical aesthetics. He did not attempt to reform poetic forms or use poetry as a tool for serious social critique. His surviving literary works, composed in his early years, include *Pātāla Rāvaṇa Vadham* (an *āṭṭakkatha*), *Kalyāṇa Saugaṁdhikam* (an *ammanappāṭṭu*), *Pativratā Dharmam* (a *kiḷippaṭṭu*), and *Bhajana Kīrtanam* . Traditional in both form and content, these works suggest that Ashan eventually stepped back from literary production, possibly disillusioned by the constraints of the prevailing poetic tradition.

Though he did not use poetry as a means to address pressing questions of his time, his cultural contributions helped prepare the ground for future voices to do so. Notably, the early poems of Kumaran Asan were published in *Sujananandini*. In recognition of Ashan's literary service, Valiya Koyi Thampuran wrote: "May God bless you with long life and health for your continuous efforts in various ways for the development of the language. I am always pleased to see your efforts succeed."

By the time of Keshavan Ashan's death in 1916, Kerala was entering a vibrant

cultural renaissance. His enduring work and leadership were deeply woven into the fabric of this transformative era.

6.1.7 Some Minor Poets

During their lifetimes, many lower-caste poets enjoyed recognition and respect, although their names have gradually faded from public memory. One such figure was Manampoor Govindanasan.

Govindanasan gained fame as a dedicated teacher who worked tirelessly to nurture the intellectual aspirations of the Ezhava community in the second half of the nineteenth century. The *Vijñāna Saṁdayinī* Sanskrit school he founded in *Nedunganda* became a beacon of hope for marginalised students. Skilled in composing verses in both Sanskrit and Malayalam, Govindanasan contributed regularly to the newspapers and literary journals of his time. Notably, Kumaran Asan studied Sanskrit under his guidance between the ages of sixteen and nineteen. According to C. O. Kesavan's records, Asan composed several early works while learning from him, including *Valli Vivāham* (an *ammanappāṭṭu*), *Uṣā Kalyāṇam* (a drama), and *Subrahmaṇya Śatakam*

Three other noteworthy poets came from the *Varanapalli* family, which was also known for offering accommodation to lower-caste students pursuing education. The first among them was Kunjukrishna Panicker, whose poem *Śatagunham*, a reflection on the virtues and flaws of certain noble figures of the time, gained local popularity. His younger brother, Govinda Panicker (1851–1907), was also widely recognised for his poetry and his skill in *samasya-pūraṇam* --a genre involving responses to poetic riddles--which featured regularly in journals and newspapers. His most celebrated compositions include *Pāñcālī Svayaṁvaram Kuraṭṭi Pāṭṭu* and *Kṛṣṇalīlā Ūññālppāṭṭu* .

The third poet was Kayamkulam K. C. Kunjan Vaidyar, whose intellectual journey was influenced by his association with Veluttheri, Perunnelli, and Sree Narayana Guru. His works, in both prose and verse, appeared in periodicals such as *Malayala Manorama* and *Sujananandini*. He remained devoted to traditional poetic forms like *ammanappāṭṭu* and *ūññālppāṭṭu*, using these styles to showcase his literary finesse.

6.1.7.1 Komathu Kunju Panicker

Another lower-caste poet who gained recognition towards the end of the nineteenth century was Komathu Kunju Panicker. Born in 1862 into the well-known Marthandam family, Panicker, like several of his contemporaries, began his literary journey by imitating the traditionalist style of poetry. However, the overt eroticism commonly found in some works of that period is notably absent from his writing.

In his poem *Tātōpadēśam*, Panicker envisioned an ideal life grounded in moral values. One might even wonder if *Tātōpadēśam* was written as a thoughtful counter-response to the genre of *Māthṛupadēśam* (teachings associated with mothers), by giving prominence to paternal guidance.

'കള്ളം കഥിക്ക, ഭയമേറ്റുക, ഗോഷ്ടികാ
ണിച്ചുള്ളം നടുക്കുക,
മനസ്സിലുറപ്പുചേർക്ക കൊള്ളാത്ത വാ
ക്കുകളുരയ്ക്ക,
യിതൊക്കെയോർത്താൽ ധം പിള്ളയ്ക്കു
മേലിൽ വലുതാകിയ ദോഷമേകും.'

(Lie, feel fear, jitter while meeting with a group, utter words that do not instil confidence in the mind, if one considers all these, they will add greatly to one's

faults even beyond those of Dharmapilla.)

This excerpt reflects the poetic style of *Tātōpadēśam*, offering a glimpse into Panicker's insightful approach to character and conduct. The psychological awareness embedded in these lines is particularly striking.

6.1.8 Shifts in Themes and Ideals in Literature

Beyond introducing new authors, Sree Narayana Guru's influence brought significant shifts in the themes and ideals explored in Malayalam literature. Traditionally, Malayalam poetry often celebrated mythical narratives, romantic love, or the glory of patrons and royalty. With the arrival of Guru and his disciples, literature began to focus more on social equality, critique of caste, and universal spirituality. The emphasis moved from pleasing kings to uplifting the wider public.

For example, Kumaran Asan's major works written after meeting Guru - such as "Veenapoovu" (The Fallen Flower), "Duravastha," and "Chandāla Bhikshuki" - although not directly about Guru, reflect his teachings. These include the impermanence of worldly life, the injustice of caste discrimination, and the importance of compassion. The moral and philosophical depth in these works can be traced to Asan's absorption of Guru's *advaitic* philosophy and his ethic of *"manushyan mādhavānu"* (be a good human being, regardless of religion).

Other writers of the time also began to portray more realistic social contexts. The progressive literature that emerged in Malayalam by the 1930s had its roots in this era of reform shaped by Guru's thought. Themes such as untouchability and the suffering of the oppressed, rarely addressed in earlier literature, became central to the works of writers like Changampuzha Krishna Pillai, Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, and Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai in the decades that followed. Though they were not direct disciples of Guru, they inherited a literary environment already transformed by his vision.

In short, Sree Narayana Guru's influence on Malayalam literature was far-reaching. He enabled the rise of writers from marginalised communities, guided and inspired key literary figures, most notably Kumaran Asan, and shifted the moral outlook of Malayalam literature towards values of equality, justice, and universal love. His well-known call, *One Caste, One Religion, One God for Humankind*, although primarily a social and spiritual declaration, also became a powerful literary theme. Malayalam literature was never the same after Guru's time: it became more inclusive in authorship and more humane in spirit.

Recap

- Pre-modern Malayalam letters were dominated by Brahmin scholars.
- Lower-caste communities were legally and ritually barred from formal schooling.

- Oral folk genres (Kaikottikkalippattu, Onappaattu) existed outside the written canon.
- Missionary and government English schools began fragile democratization in the late 19th C.
- Sree Narayana Guru, born Ezhava, broke caste taboos by studying Sanskrit and Malayalam.
- Guru trained under Raman Pillai Asan alongside Velutheri and Perunnelli.
- Sitting "outside the kalari" symbolised initial caste segregation inside gurukulas.
- Guru's success modelled the possibility of scholarly excellence for avarnas.
- Velutheri Kesavan Vaidyar mastered Attakatha, Vanchippattu and literary criticism.
- Velutheri received the royal Veerasrunkhala for Arthalankara Manipravalam.
- Perunnelli Krishnan Vaidyan popularized the Venmani style in southern Travancore.
- Perunnelli's play Subhadraharanam won open competitions against high-caste poets.
- Paravoor Keshavan Ashan founded *Sujananandini*, publishing writers of any caste.
- Early journals provided new print space for marginalized voices.
- Guru's dictum "One Caste, One Religion, One God for humankind" inspired literary themes.
- Kumaranasan's poems (e.g., *Chandalabhikshuki*) critique untouchability.
- Writers began depicting realistic social suffering instead of mythic courtly themes.
- Royal and elite patronage was no longer the sole path to literary recognition.
- Lower-caste poets proved aptitude in Sanskrit translation and poetics.
- Guru's networks supported Ayurveda scholars and Sanskrit teachers among Ezhavas.
- Literary debates in newspapers eroded inherited caste hierarchies.

- Chattampi Swamikal, Velutheri, and Perunnelli collaborated across caste lines.
- Popular reception of lower-caste dramas indicated changing audience attitudes.
- By the 1920s non-Brahmin literary presence became irreversible.
- Reformist ethos paved the way for later progressives like Basheer and Thakazhi.
- Kerala's renaissance in letters rooted itself in Guru-inspired humanism.
- Inclusion of marginalized authors expanded the moral compass of Malayalam literature.
- The unit situates literary change within broader social, educational, and spiritual reform.

Objective Questions

1. Dominant caste in pre-modern Malayalam literature?
2. Guru's birth community?
3. Guru's famous egalitarian dictum begins with "One ____"?
4. Award Velutheri received from Vishakham Thirunal?
5. Newspaper founded by Paravoor Keshavan Ashan?
6. Southern poet nicknamed *Śṛṅgāra Raṅgādhipan*?
7. Guru's closest poetic disciple?
8. Literary form of Balisugreeva Sambhavam?
9. Guru, Velutheri, and Perunnelli first studied under which teacher (surname)?
10. What does Venmani style emphasize?

Answers

1. Brahmins
2. Ezhava
3. Caste
4. Veerasrunkhala
5. Sujananandini
6. Perunnelli
7. Kumaranasan
8. Attakatha
9. Asan
10. Simplicity

Assignments

1. Trace the socio-historical factors that enabled Sree Narayana Guru to access classical education and discuss how this challenged caste orthodoxy.

2. "Print culture became the new battleground of caste." Evaluate this statement with reference to *Sujananandini* and other early journals.

3. Compare the literary careers of Velutheri Kesavan Vaidyar and Perunnelli Krishnan Vaidyan, focusing on genre choices and social impact.

4. Assess the role of Guru's dictum "One Caste, One Religion, One God for humankind" in reshaping Malayalam poetic themes between 1890-1930.

5. How did Malayalam literature's center of patronage shift from royal courts to popular readership, and what implications did this have for marginalized writers?

6. Examine the indirect influence of Sree Narayana Guru on later progressive novelists and dramatists of Kerala's renaissance.

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SGOU

2

UNIT

Poems in Praise of Narayana Guru

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- identify poems praising Guru and name their respective Malayalam authors.
- describe imagery, metres, and styles portraying Guru's life and message.
- analyse guru-bhakti poetry's role in caste reform and movements.
- avaluate Guru-centric poetry's influence on Malayalam literature and cultural reform.

Prerequisites

To understand the true significance of Kumaran Asan's poetic tributes to Sree Narayana Guru, one must first appreciate the extraordinary and transformative relationship between them. This was not merely a teacher-student bond, but a profound spiritual and intellectual connection that shaped Asan's entire life and, in turn, the path of Malayalam literature.

As Professor N. Krishnapillai firmly states, if asked to identify the most decisive event that influenced Kumaran Asan as both a person and a poet, the answer would be: "My Sreenarayana Darshanam." This encounter with Sree Narayana Guru formed the foundation of Asan's material and spiritual development. Considering Asan's background --marked by a lack of family support, financial means, caste privilege, community backing or suitable conditions for higher learning - his poetic gifts may have gone unrecognised without the Guru's guidance. In a society

rigidly controlled by caste, such disadvantages would typically prevent any form of advancement. The Guru's mentorship offered the inspiration, knowledge and opportunities that allowed Asan's talent to thrive.

This mutual influence is beautifully summarised by Dr K. Prasobhan: "If asked to sum up Sreenarayana Guru's greatest contribution to cultural Kerala in one word, there is only one answer: Kumaranasan." This statement reflects the deep connection between the two. Their relationship became a meeting point of social change and literary awakening—a unique partnership that played a vital role in the cultural rebirth of Kerala. While Guru's reforms found voice in Asan's poetry, Asan's literary genius was shaped by the Guru's vision.

At the heart of this bond lies the traditional Indian view of the Guru. In Indian spiritual thought, the Guru is often seen as either God or an embodiment of the divine. The well-known verse, "ഗുരുർബ്രഹ്മ ഗുരുർവിഷ്ണു ഗുരുദേവോ മഹേശ്വരഃ ഗുരുഃസാക്ഷാത്പരം ബ്രഹ്മ" (Guru is Brahma, Guru is Vishnu, Guru is Maheswara; truly, the Guru is the Supreme Brahman), captures this reverence. As a devoted disciple and spiritual seeker, Asan fully accepted this idea. He saw Sree Narayana Guru not only as a wise teacher, but as a realised yogi and his personal spiritual guide. For Asan, the Guru was the divine source of liberation. This deep respect is felt throughout Asan's writings, especially in his early devotional works where the Guru's blessings are seen as essential for attaining Nirvana. To Asan, the Guru's "lotus feet" symbolised the path to spiritual fulfilment. This heartfelt devotion forms the essential context through which his praise poems must be viewed.

Key themes

Kumaranasan, Gurustavam, Guru-bhakti, Vañcippāṭṭu, Renaissance literature, Social reform, Devotional poetry

Discussion

While Kumaran Asan's poetic tributes to Sree Narayana Guru are not large in number, they remain foundational works in Malayalam literature due to their exceptional depth and unwavering devotion. Despite living with the Guru for many years, Asan chose to express his reverence through a few carefully composed masterpieces, ensuring they would have enduring significance.

6.2.1 Defining Praises

Among Asan's works dedicated to the Guru, three are widely recognised as structurally complete poems: *Gurusatavam*, *Swami Thirunal Vanchippattu*, and *Gurupadadasakam*. Together with several auspicious verses, these compositions form a heartfelt and lyrical tribute to his spiritual guide.

6.2.2 Guru's Presence in Devotional Hymns

Beyond his direct eulogies, Kumaran Asan also wove tributes to Sree Narayana Guru into his broader body of devotional poetry. Works such as *Nijanandavilasam*, *Nijanandanubhuti*, *Bhaktavilapam*, *Subrahmanya Shatakam*, *Shivasthothramala*, and *Sankara Shatakam* contain scattered yet meaningful references to the Guru. Although these compositions primarily follow the devotional genre's focus on universal themes rather than personal narrative, they consistently depict the Guru as a self-realised yogi and a divine guide.

In *Nijanandavilasam*, Asan firmly asserts that *Nirvana* cannot be attained without the grace of the Guru. He positions the Guru's feet as the "gateway to Nirvana," reflecting the centrality of the master in spiritual awakening. In *Bhaktavilapam*, Asan emotionally recalls the Guru as the compassionate saviour who brought peace to his previously restless and troubled mind.

Even after completing his advanced studies, Asan's *Shivasthothramala* (1902) reveals that his devotion to the Guru had grown even deeper. In this work, he portrays the Guru as the one who severs the roots of his sins and frees him from the cycle of rebirth. This consistent presence of the Guru across Asan's devotional writings illustrates his unshakable spiritual bond with his teacher. It is clear that for Asan, devotion to the Guru was not separate from devotion to the divine--it was, in fact, its purest expression.

6.2.3 Asan's Evolving Vision: From Devotion to Social Conscience

Dr. Prasobhan points out that Asan's early poems largely focused on the spiritual teachings of Sree Narayana Guru and his own path to personal liberation. However, his poetic journey evolved in a significant way. This shift was strongly influenced by his role as secretary of the S.N.D.P. Yogam, a position likely entrusted to him by the Guru and Dr Palpu. This engagement with social reform deepened Asan's understanding of the Guru's broad and complex personality, drawing him into the active work of community upliftment. Through his involvement in addressing social issues, Asan came to see the Guru not only as a spiritual leader but also as a committed reformer.

This broader vision is clearly reflected in Asan's later *khanda kavyas*. Poems such as 'Veena Poovu', 'Duravastha', 'Chandalabhikshuki', and 'Karuna' represent a meaningful departure from purely devotional themes. 'Veena Poovu' is a metaphorical reflection on the fleeting nature of life and the experience of human suffering. In 'Duravastha', Asan boldly addresses caste injustice and the hardships faced by the oppressed, aligning closely with the Guru's ideals of equality and reform. 'Chandalabhikshuki' offers a striking critique of caste discrimination through its sensitive portrayal of a marginalised woman. Likewise, 'Karuna' explores the painful life of an untouchable girl, shining a light on the cruelty of caste hierarchy and expressing the Guru's moral message through a deeply human narrative.

This evolution of Guru's philosophic vision in Asan's poetry shows a deep integration of spiritual insight with social awareness. His writing moves from a focus on individual liberation to a vision of collective upliftment. It becomes clear that for Asan, true spirituality is not limited to personal enlightenment but is fulfilled in service to society. What may seem like

a divide between spiritual depth and social engagement in his later poems is in fact a thoughtful union. It reflects Asan's belief that the spiritual path must extend into the world and foster justice, dignity, and compassion.

In this way, Asan's literary journey captures the profound influence of Sree Narayana Guru's philosophy. His works show how spiritual wisdom and social action can come together as one powerful force for human transformation.

6.2.4 Kumaran Asan's Homage to the Guru

When discussing poems composed in praise of Sree Narayana Guru, the works of Mahakavi Kumaran Asan (1873–1924) hold a special place. Asan was not only a devoted disciple of the Guru but also a pioneering voice in modern Malayalam literature. His deep respect for his spiritual master found poetic expression in several works that explicitly honour the Guru. Although Asan spent many years in close companionship with Gurudevan, he wrote only a small number of poems that focused entirely on him. Yet these few compositions stand out for their heartfelt quality and depth of devotion.

Despite requesting that no grand celebration be held, Gurudevan received a stream of devotees at the Aluva Advaita Ashram, where he chose to stay. The observance at the ashram remained modest, with an emphasis on charity. Food and clothing were distributed to everyone who visited. Kumaran Asan also travelled to Aluva to be with his master. With the Guru's blessing, he sang a hymn that he had specially composed, titled Samajastuti. The Guru was pleased and said: "Well done, Kumaru, this is good! May it prosper, it will prosper." (അല്ല കുമാരൂ, കൊള്ളാമല്ലോ! നന്നായി വരട്ടെ, നന്നായി വരും). This hymn later developed into Gurustavam, a devotional prayer that continues to be chanted in temples, homes, and ashrams by followers of the Guru.

In 1916, the Guru's sixtieth birthday (Shashtiabdapoorthi) was celebrated across Kerala. The S.N.D.P. Yogam, under the leadership of Kumaran Asan, began preparations well in advance. A special building, the "Sree Narayana Shashtipoorthi Smarakamandiram", was constructed in Kaithamukku, Thiruvananthapuram. On 27 August 1916, Diwan Bahadur M. Krishnan Nair inaugurated the venue. The event included traditional rituals such as homams and prayers, and food was served to all attendees. Many members of the S.N.D.P. Yogam and followers of the Guru gathered for the occasion.

The poem originally included seven verses, among which one contains a direct prayer for the Guru's long life. Although the seventh verse is less commonly recited today, it reflects the personal bond between poet and teacher. The Guru's response – 'നന്നായി വരും' (May it prosper) - is seen as a blessing for both Asan and those who continue to chant the poem.

Asan proceeded to compose several other works in praise of Gurudevan. These include Swami Thirunal Vanchi Pattu (a boat song of thirty-five couplets), Gurupadashakam (ten verses dedicated to the Guru's feet), and commemorative verses such as Swami Thirunal Mangalam and Shashtiabdapoorthi Mangalam. Although all of these celebrate Gurudevan as a divine being, Gurustavam became the most widely loved and recited among them. Early publishers of Asan's collected works, including the 1925 edition compiled

by his wife Bhanumathi Amma, regularly included "Gurustavam," sometimes under the simpler title "Guru".

These editions usually contained seven verses, the final one being a prayer for the Guru's long life:

തൻപോലെയെറുമ്പാദിയെയും പാർത്തി
ടുമങ്ങേ-
ക്കൻപോടുലകർത്ഥിപ്പു ചിത്തയുസ്സു ദയാബ്ധേ!
മുൻപോൽ സുഖമായ് മേന്മ തൊടു
ന്നോർക്കരുളും കാൽ-
തുമ്പോടിനിയും വാഴ്ക ശതാബ്ദം ഗുരു
മൂർത്തേ!

(*O Gurumoorthi, ocean of compassion, who sees even the lowly ant as equal to yourself – the world lovingly prays for your long life. As in the past, may you continue to bless those aspiring to rise with the touch of your sacred feet. May you live on joyfully for a hundred more years, O embodiment of the Guru.*)

Notably, this seventh verse, along with refrains such as "നാരായണ മൂർത്തേ" (Narayana Moorthe), is often omitted from prayer books today. It is believed that these refrains may have been added later by disciples. The exact reason for the seventh verse falling out of use remains uncertain. Some suggest it may have been seen as inappropriate to explicitly wish long life to an enlightened Guru. Others believe it could be because Kumaran Asan passed away before Gurudevan did. Regardless of the reason, the Guru's blessing, "നന്നായി വരും"' ("It will prosper"), is thought to extend not only to Asan but to all who recite this hymn. This enduring blessing is part of what makes "Gurustavam" especially cherished among the many poems honouring the Guru.

To truly appreciate 'Gurustavam', one must understand what Sree Narayana Guru meant to Kumaran Asan. As Professor N. Krishnapillai remarks in his work Aashan Kavithakkoru Aamukham, had anyone asked Asan, moments before his untimely death, to name the most significant event or influence in his life as both a person and a poet, his reply would have been simple: "My Sreenarayana Darshanam." Krishnapillai concludes that the Guru was the very root of all Asan's material progress and spiritual awakening.

Without meeting Gurudevan, Asan - who lacked family wealth, social status, community backing, and a supportive environment for higher learning or literary growth - might have written only a few notable poems based on natural talent alone. He could have remained a village schoolteacher, known only in Kaikkara and its nearby areas, and faded from wider cultural memory. In his article "The Influence of Sreenarayana Guru on Malayalam Poetry," Dr K. Prasobhan makes a striking claim: "If asked to sum up Sreenarayana Guru's greatest contribution to cultural Kerala in one word, there is only one answer: Kumaran Asan." This reflects the profound impact of their relationship - a meeting of two transformative forces, one rooted in social and spiritual reform, the other in literary brilliance--which helped spark a cultural renaissance.

From their very first encounter, Gurudevan recognised the remarkable potential in Kumaru. Much like iron filings drawn to a magnet, the Guru's presence attracted the young poet towards a path of discovery. He nurtured and supported Kumaran's education. Notably, Gurudevan encouraged Dr P. Palpu to assist with Kumaran's higher studies. Guru advised, "We need many young

people among us who are brave and well-educated. Those with an aptitude for learning should be selected and taught." He welcomed Kumaru into his inner circle and helped him acquire the maturity, experience, philosophy, and vision required for transforming him into one of Kerala's greatest poets.

The bond between Kumaran Asan and Gurudevan has often been likened to that between Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. The distinguished scholar Ulloor S. Parameswara Iyer compared their relationship to that of Yogeshwara Sree Krishna guiding the archer Arjuna.

In those early years when Gurudevan taught children in Anjuthengu, Chempazhanthy, and Kadakkavoor, he would frequently visit Kayikkara, a nearby coastal village. Asan's father, Narayanan Perungudi, was a devoted follower of the Guru. It is believed that during one such visit, at the invitation of Narayanan, Gurudevan first met the young Kumaru.

When Gurudevan prepared to leave after arranging for Kumaru to study under Dr Palpu, Kumaru's heart drooped like a flower cut from its stem. Gurudevan gently placed his hand on Kumaru's tearful head, consoled him with affection, and blessed him before departing. Kumaran Asan later described this profound spiritual moment in his work "Nijanandavilasam":

മന്ദാരപ്പൂംകൊടിക്കൈമലർ മധുരമെടു
ത്തെന്നെ മാനിച്ചു മായ-
കന്ദാപായം ഭവിക്കും പടിയുടൽ പുണ
രും കൗശലത്തിൽ കലർത്തി,
മന്ദാഭാവാനുകമ്പം മമ മുകളിൽ മുകർ
ന്നുറുമദ്വൈതസമ്പത്സന്ദാനം
ചെയ്ത സാരാമൃതലഹരിമൊഴിക്കേതു
ഞാനാദരിപ്പൂ!

(*With his mandara-flower-like hands, he gently took me - the sweet blossom that I was - and cherished me. In a skilful way that removed the root of ignorance in me, with gentle compassion he placed his hand upon my head. I received the stream of nectar-like words of Advaita wisdom he then shared.*)

C.O.Kesavan, in his biography 'Mahakavi Kumaranasan', noted the strength of Asan's attachment to Gurudevan: "Even when his parents, through relatives, expressed their deep desire to see him during his stay with Sreenarayana Guru at Aruvippuram, Asan was hesitant to go." Such reluctance shows how difficult it was for Asan to be apart from Gurudevan, even for a short time. K. Surendran shares a moving scene in his book "Kumaranasan": "On one occasion, Asan's elderly mother, hearing that her son was nearby at the temple, hurried there in motherly concern and asked, 'Which sacred text says, son, that you should not come to see your mother?'" These touching stories reveal the deep emotional bond that united Kumaran Asan and Gurudevan.

Gurudevan watched Kumaru grow with pride, recognising his transformation from "Kumaru" to "Kumaran Asan" and finally to "Mahakavi Kumaran Asan". In letters, conversations, and organisational matters, Gurudevan called him "Kumaran Asan" even before that title was widely acknowledged by others.

Gurudevan was the guiding force behind Kumaran Asan's work as the editor of Vivekodayam, the official journal of the S. N. D. P. Yogam, and Pratibha, a magazine published by the Cherai Vijnanavarshini Sabha. It was also Gurudevan who

inspired Asan to serve as a member of the Sree Moolam Prajasabha (the Travancore Legislative Assembly), helping to shape Asan's engagement in public life.

One of the more touching examples of their relationship is Asan's Sanskrit poem "Oru Samarpanam" (An Offering), written to request the Guru's permission for his marriage. The Guru granted his consent, showing not only his approval but also the human warmth of the guru-disciple relationship.

Asan also composed several 'maṅgalasloka'(benedictory verses) in honour of the Guru on different occasions. In these stanzas, he often described the Guru as the radiant sun who dispels the darkness of ignorance and as a divine messenger who brings hope to the downtrodden. From the 1910s through the 1920s, Asan's reverence for Gurudevan remained constant and unwavering.

6.2.5 Other Poetic Tributes by Contemporaries

While Kumaran Asan's celebrated poems hold a central place in Malayalam literature devoted to Sree Narayana Guru, he was not the only one to offer poetic tributes. Several of the Guru's contemporaries, moved by his spiritual presence and remarkable social reforms, also composed verses that reflect deep admiration. These poems, shaped by personal devotion or observations of the Guru's public influence, further strengthened his legacy within Kerala's cultural and literary world.

6.2.5.1 C. V. Kunhiraman's 'Swami Chaithanyam'

C.V.Kunhiraman (1871–1949), known primarily as a journalist and literary critic, wrote an influential long poem titled 'Swami Chaithanyam' (The Life-force of the Swami). It captures a powerful moment at the Guru's ashram and highlights the sweeping social changes brought about by his teachings. In the poem, Kunhiraman describes the visit of the Dewan of Travancore, Sir Krishna Nair, and several other high-caste officials to Guru's hermitage at Sivagiri. Breaking with all previous social expectations, these distinguished guests were received and garlanded by four young Pulaya boys, disciples of the Guru at the ashram.

The poet reflects with astonishment on this reversal of custom. Those who had once been made to hide in the bushes whenever high-caste people passed were now standing tall, offering floral garlands to Brahmins and nobles on behalf of the Guru. Kunhiraman refers to several caste groups to show how Guru's movement began to erase the barriers that had long divided society. He even notes how the "'കള്ളനും പാക്കനാര്" - communities once seen as the lowest of the low - gained dignity through their connection with the Guru, so much so that even the elite bowed their heads in respect.

One frequently quoted stanza, known for its sharp satire, describes the condition of Kerala before Guru's reforms:

'കേരളത്തിലുള്ള എല്ലാ ജാതിക്കാരും മതക്കാരും 'അനാചാരവിഷം തീണ്ടി മൂർച്ഛിച്ചു ശവതുല്യരായി' കിടന്നിരുന്നതായി അയ്യപ്പൻ കണ്ടു.'

(*Ayyappan [the poet] saw that people of all castes and creeds lay unconscious like corpses, had partaken of the poison of immoral customs in Kerala..)*

In "Swami Chaithanyam", Kunhiraman honours the Guru as a miracle-worker who achieved what had once seemed unthinkable. He united people across caste

lines into a shared spiritual community and won respect even from those who once treated him with scorn. The poem closes with a powerful image of Guru's divine life-force, his chaithanyam, awakening people to the emptiness of caste pride. It is portrayed as a true *prasaadam*, a sacred blessing flowing from the Guru's grace.

6.2.5.2 Pandit K. P. Karuppan's Verses

Pandit K. P. Karuppan (1885–1938), a respected poet in his own right, also composed verses in honour of Sree Narayana Guru. Born into the Valan (Araya) community, an avarna and ayithakkār (untouchable) group without an inherited literary tradition, Karuppan rose to prominence through the unique social shifts taking place in early twentieth-century Kerala. His poetry reflects the complex emotions of pride and pain that marked the experience of his community at the time. Although the Arayas had played important roles as navigators and armed guards in the political history of Cochin, they were still treated as untouchable on land and were denied access to schools, temples, and public spaces. This contradiction left a lasting impression on Karuppan's literary voice.

Karuppan studied Sanskrit and Malayalam under various teachers and later trained at the famous literary kalaris of Kodungallur Palace. His early works followed the conservative styles of his celebrated contemporaries, but he later underwent a turning point. He began to recognise the urgent social problems of his time, and his poetry became a powerful means for challenging injustice. This shift made him a bold and sometimes controversial figure.

In 1916, during the All Kerala Fraternity Conference organised by Guru's disciples, Karuppan recited a Sanskrit ashirvachana (benediction) in praise of the Guru. Although the full text is not widely available, it is said that Karuppan described Guru as 'Lokacharya' (world teacher) and credited him with bringing about a new era for the oppressed of Kerala. He also paid tribute to the Guru by translating his Sanskrit work 'Nirvriti Panchakam' into Malayalam.

Among Karuppan's most significant contributions is the poem 'Jātikkummi' (1912), a direct and poetic challenge to the caste system. Published at a time when Sreenarayana Guru's campaign against caste discrimination was gaining momentum, 'Jātikkummi' gave voice to the idea that all human beings belong to a single caste and that caste divisions are artificial. The poem echoes the message of Śaṅkarāchārya's''Manīṣā-pañcakam' and includes the striking line: "ഇക്കാണും ലോകങ്ങളീശ്വരന്റെ മക്കളാണെല്ലാമൊരുജാതി..." ("All these worlds are the children of God, all are of one caste..."). The poem also includes a satirical episode about obsession with caste purity. It resonated strongly with the Valan community and other marginalised groups, who began reciting it in their homes.

His play *Bālākalēśam*(1912), written under the appearance of royal praise, was in fact a strong critique of the prevailing social system. It was entered into a competition and won, despite the social message hidden in its lines. One of Karuppan's most defiant works, however, is the poem "Udyānavirunnu"(1925), which he wrote after being excluded from a garden banquet held in honour of the Madras Governor. At the time, Karuppan was an elected member of the Legislative Council, yet he was denied entry because of his caste. In the poem, he confronted the Raja, exposing the double standard of excluding him while the Governor, a

British official, welcomed chandālas in other regions with respect. This event reinforced Karuppan's belief that the denial of basic rights to the oppressed was rooted in internal social forces, not simply colonial rule. He increasingly supported avarna leaders who demanded political and social freedom.

Through these later works, Karuppan fully embraced social reform and used his poetry to argue for justice and dignity. His commitment to these causes has ensured his lasting place in the literary and cultural history of Kerala.

6.2.5.3 Bodheswaran's 'Narayana Guru' Elegy

Poet Bodheswaran (1901–1990), who belonged to the generation that followed immediately after Guru's passing, wrote a touching Malayalam elegy when Sree Narayana Guru attained Samadhi in 1928. In this heartfelt poem, Bodheswaran mourns the loss of what he calls "Kerala's guiding light", yet affirms with conviction that the Guru's message will live on. Lines such as 'ദാഹം തീർത്ത പുഴ ഒഴിഞ്ഞാൽ, നിന്നും ദൃക്കുളിർത്ത നീരു' ("If the river that quenched thirst dries up, yet its cool waters remain in memory") express his sorrow through a powerful metaphor. This poem shows how, even at the moment of loss, poets turned Guru's life into legend and literary memory, ensuring his presence remained alive in the collective imagination.

6.2.6 Admiration beyond Discipleship

Sree Narayana Guru inspired admiration even beyond his circle of disciples. Vallathol Narayana Menon, one of the three great figures of modern Malayalam poetry along with Asan and Ulloor, visited Guru and is reported to have composed a short verse praising his wisdom and simplicity. Although Guru does not appear prominently in Vallathol's major works, this gesture shows the depth of his respect.

Guru's appeal extended beyond Malayalam literary circles as well. Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali Nobel laureate, met Guru in 1922 and later wrote an essay of praise. Though the original was not in Malayalam, Tagore's words greatly elevated Guru's image. His tribute inspired translations and poems in Malayalam echoing the same admiration. In one well-known Malayalam article, Tagore is quoted as saying, "I have been touring different parts of the world. During these travels, I have had the good fortune to come into contact with several saints and Maharshis (great saints). But I have frankly to admit that I have never come across one who is spiritually greater than Swami Sree Narayana Guru of Malayalam-nay a person who is on a par with his spiritual attainments. I am sure, I shall never forget radiant face, illumined by the self-effulgent light of divine glory and those yogic eyes fixing their gaze on a remote point in the distant horizon." It has become an oftquoted line for the poets and writers of all time.

In all these tributes, the literary praise for Sree Narayana Guru goes far beyond formal admiration. It reveals a shared sense of wonder, gratitude, and inspiration. Poets recognised in him an embodiment of their highest ideals --social justice, spiritual depth, and moral strength - and preserved his memory in verse. Through their words, Guru's legacy continues to guide and uplift.

6.2.7 Impact of Guru-Eulogies in Poetry

The poems dedicated to Sree Narayana Guru made a lasting impact on both Malayalam literature and society. From a literary perspective, they enriched Malayalam poetry by introducing a devotional idiom that was modern in its themes but traditional in its reverence. These were not mere hymns. Many were well-crafted works that combined 'bhakti' (devotion) with social critique. For example, Asan's poems, including his vanchippattu, serve both as literary achievements and as expressions of social reform. The vanchippattu quietly questions the caste system even as it praises the Guru.

On the social front, these poems played a key role in spreading Guru's message to a wide audience. In a time when mass media was limited, poetry recitations and kavi sammelans (gatherings of poets) were popular forms of public communication. A heartfelt poem sung in a village could move listeners just as much as a speech. Memorable lines, such as 'വാഴുക വാഴുക നാരായണഗുരു' (Long live Narayana Guru), became slogans repeated across communities. Asan's poem 'ഗുരു' is believed to have helped popularise the address 'Gurudeva' throughout Kerala. Reciting or singing these verses together also gave Guru's followers a shared sense of respect and unity.

A notable modern work in this tradition is Kilimanoor Remakanthan's epic poem "Gurupatham". In this unique Malayalam composition, Śrī Nārāyaṇa Gurudevan himself is imagined as the narrator of his life. First published in Kalakaumudi magazine under the title 'Guru', the poem was later compiled into a complete book. It combines literary grace with deep spiritual devotion, portraying the Guru as a liberator and guiding light who reshaped Kerala's social and ethical vision.

The poet describes Gurudevan as a divine presence, hidden like a golden thread inside a jewel box, silent, radiant, and powerful. His journey from Chempazhanthy to Śivagiri, from the cave at Piḷḷathadam to the lamps of Tiruchandur, is narrated in language that is both reverent and reflective. Remakanthan, having taught for fifteen years at Sree Narayana College in the Guru's birthplace, brings to the poem a personal knowledge of the geography and spiritual atmosphere that shaped the Guru's path.

At the core of "Gurupatham" is Gurudevan's snehadharmam [സ്നേഹ ധർമ്മം] - a religion of love - and his commitment to the ideals of education (vidyā – വിദ്യ), unity, compassion (karuṇā – കനിവ്), and freedom from caste and religious intolerance. The poem mourns the ongoing presence of ignorance, violence, and division in the modern world, while at the same time offering hope through the Guru's eternal message. His teachings are likened to the light of the keṭāviḷakku [കെടാവിളക്ക്], illuminating every conscious atom of the universe (സചേതനപ്രപഞ്ചം).

Vakil P Madhavan

The extent to which the erudite among the first generation of marginalized Ezhavas, educated in the schools established by Sree Narayana Guru for their liberation, reflected the impacts of Guru and Asan in their creative sensibility is a crucial point. Though many of these students could not afford higher education, a limited few managed to pursue advanced studies independently. Some later attempted versification to eulogize Guru. Unfortunately, many such literary outpourings are not

readily traceable or have been lost over time. However, some remnants in private libraries are worth discussing.

The earliest English school founded by Narayana Guru in 1920 was Sree Narayana Vilasa Samajam School at Nedunganda (near Sivagiri), which continues to function as a Government-Aided Higher Secondary School. Among its first batch of students, P. Madhavan (later known by his pen-name, Vakil P. Madhavan) qualified for the school final exam in 1928. He then began working as a teacher at Luther Mission School, Nilamel. In 1930, he left teaching to study law at His Highness the Maharaja's Law College, Thiruvananthapuram.

Having qualified for the pleadership exam in 1934, Madhavan began his legal profession as an Advocate in Attingal (a town near Varkala). He was soon drawn into public life as an orator, poet, public speaker, writer, columnist, and freedom fighter. As a familial disciple of Narayana Guru, he led a life of abstinence from alcohol, aligning with Gandhian principles of non-violence and simplicity. He propagated Guru's teachings throughout his life (1911–2001). His essays on Gandhi, Nehru, and Bose, published on various platforms in the pre-independence era, were collected in a volume titled 'Nirakudangal'. This book, published in 1947, featured an appreciation by Vallathol Narayana Menon and a preface by Malloor Govinda Pillai.

As an eyewitness to the meeting between Rabindranath Tagore and Narayana Guru at Sivagiri on November 15, 1922, Vakil Madhavan cherished the glory and radiance emanating from the two great mystic poets, Gurudev and Gurudevan, throughout his lifetime. He had the rare opportunity to listen curiously to their soft-spoken conversation. This indelible impression of Guru, formed in his boyhood, and the messages he imbibed as a student of the school named after Guru, left lasting impacts on his subconscious mind. This profound influence became the impetus for him to compose three poems about the great ascetic.

During Narayana Guru's time, education was largely unaffordable for common Ezhavas, leading to only a limited number of scholars and intellectuals emerging from these downtrodden communities. Despite these limitations, Vakil P. Madhavan, a contemporary of Nataraja Guru, Guru Nitya, and Muni Narayana Prasad, emerged as a thinker. He exchanged views with them on the philosophy of non-dualism reflected in Guru's works and exhortations. Beyond these discourses, Madhavan's contributions as the founder secretary of the Asan Memorial Association at Kayikkara (the poet Kumaran Asan's birthplace) from 1961 to 1973, further broadened his exposure to the missions of both Guru and Asan.

In 1974, Vakil P. Madhavan composed 'Gurukaruna', a 328-line poem in four parts. It described Narayana Guru, his life, and mission in the Vanchipattu (boat song) tradition, popularized by Kumaran Asan in 'Swami Thirunal Vanchi Pattu'. 'Gurukaruna' was published in the same year for the Sree Narayana Bhaktha Vanitha Samajam to recite at Sivagiri, coinciding with Guru's 120th birth anniversary. The poem incorporates lines from Kumaran Asan's work 'Karuna', which Mahakavi M.P. Appan observed, "elevated its stature in attaining the artistic and aesthetic merit."

The poet's another composition, 'Abhinava Buddhan Adhava Sree Narayanan' (The Novel Buddha Alias Sree

Narayana), is a hymn to Narayana Guru, worshipped as a sanctified saint elevated to divinity. Composed in 1973, it was inspired by Kumaran Asan's glorification of Guru in 'Samajasthuthi' (Gurustavam) and served as the prayer song for Sivagiri Dharma Sodari Mutt, which also published it. The poem's initial quatrains describe Buddha's arrival, followed by an evaluation of Adi Sankara's philosophy's perceived failure, leading to caste hierarchies in Kerala. Subsequent stanzas celebrate Guru's divine birth, education, mission, and vision in simple Malayalam, accessible to every devotee

Vivekodayam Books published another poetic composition by Madhavan, "Sree Narayana Gurudevan," in 1982. This more serious poem, consisting of 65 quatrains, communicates Guru's mission and exhortations, his envisioned reforms, the significance of his meetings with Tagore and Gandhi, and the inevitability of the do's and don'ts he advised devotees. It concludes with a glorification of Guru's marble statue at his Sivagiri monument.

These lines form the poet's most befitting tribute to his guiding light, as he was a chosen familial disciple who carried forward Guru's virtues throughout his life. Madhavan also undertook another poetic composition, 'Sri. Chattambi Swami Thiruvadikal', a 65-quatrain work in two sections, published in 1982. In its introduction, poet Sooranad Kunjan Pillai notes the parallel lives of Chattambi Swamikal (from a privileged caste) and Narayana Guru (from an underprivileged background). He describes their lives as "the flow of the two holy rivers Ganga and Yamuna," great sources that joined to share visions, enrich mutual sanctity, and flow together, finally merging into the Eternal Ocean. This highlights the shared essence of two immortal souls, transcending caste divisions.

P Damodara Panicker and Valadi Kesava Kurup

From among the erudities emerged in the successive generations reflecting sensitive sensibility to Gurudevan's life and ideology in the early times, include two significant figures, P Damodara Panicker and Valadi Kesava Kurup, one from the under – privileged and the other from the privileged section of the Kerala society respectively. P Damodara Panicker composed 'The Life and Teachings of Narayana Gurudev' in English and published it in 1972. He is the nephew of the Malayalam poet Mooloor S Padmanabha Panicker. He describes in 2038 lines, all the major episodes connected with the life of Narayana Guru and the messages he conveyed, from his birth to the samadhi. The last moments of the Guru are described in lines 1966 to 1975 as below:

"For three four days He could not speak at all.
Yet consciousness had not been fully lost
Then Swamiji was taken to the holy Mutt
Where, from the inn He was resting at least,
At PM on Thursday at 3 O'Clock
On fifth of Kanny eleven nought and four.
The greatest world – Saint Sree Guru Narayan
Did attain the great Eternal silence"

(lines 1966 – 1975)

Valadi Kesava Kurup's poem 'Sree Narayana Gurudeva Suprabhatham' (Sree Narayana Gurudevan: A Morning Invocation) was published in 1973, in 20 quatrains in Malayalam with a preface added by prof.G. Balakrishnan Nair and commentaries by A.V.Sankaran. In his preface Balakrishnan Nair writes: "the poet combines Guru's external life and the insights he attained through self -realization with great reverence in this work."

It was published by Sree Narayana publishing house, Chempazhanthy. The poem stands as a testimony to illustrate, the extent to which the life and teachings of Gurudevan resonated in the sensibility of the privileged, in Kerala society in due course, to workout the reformation.

In exploring the contributions of the modern poets of our time to this genre surface Shaji Nayarambalam ‘s 'Gurudēvagīta', a poetic attempt to place Śrī Nārāyaṇa Gurudevan at the spiritual and philosophical centre of Kerala’s transformation. Traditional mythology tells us that Kerala rose from the sea through Parashurāma’s axe, but the poem suggests that Kerala’s real modern awakening came from the ascetic [താപസൻ] who wielded the axe of wisdom to remove superstition and harmful customs. Gurudevan is presented as the true foundation of Kerala’s spiritual renewal, modern progress, and enlightenment.

Shaji Nayarambalam, a poet known through various journals and publications, brings an independent voice shaped by a refined poetic sensibility. 'Gurudēvagīta' reflects a balance between thought and style, with lyrical expression and meaningful content. A particularly striking section of the poem responds to Rabindranath Tagore’s praise for Gurudevan’s presence. The verse, composed in a classical Sanskrit metre (വൃത്തം), deepens the poem’s spiritual tone.

The poem also follows Gurudevan’s life in sequence (അനുക്രമ), drawing attention to important figures such as Dr Palpu, Kumaran Asan, and Sahodaran Ayyappan. Through poetic appropriateness (ഔചിത്യം), Shaji gives each person their rightful place within the Guru’s spiritual and historical setting (പ്രകാശവലം).

Importantly, the poet does not simply honour the past. He boldly challenges the growing influence of superstition in today’s society, making 'Gurudēvagīta' not only a poetic offering but also a philosophical statement. Even the sections that do not follow a biographical structure remain grounded in the overarching spiritual consciousness (ഗുരുദേവചൈതന്യ) of Gurudevan. Altogether, the work is a meaningful contribution to Kerala’s literary tradition, offering both inspiration and aesthetic delight (സൗന്ദര്യാനുഭൂതി).

E.K. Muraleedharan’s 'Gurudeva charitham Vanchipattu' is a sincere tribute to Sree Narayana Gurudevan, portraying him as an enlightened seer, poetic visionary, and embodiment of selfless action and dharma. The poem suggests that truly understanding the Guru is a path of self-discovery, for he represents the supreme Self within all living beings. Composed in the widely accessible vañcippāṭṭu metre, this poetic garland acts like a devotional journey, drawing on the Guru’s own writings and key biographical moments.

Muraleedharan, whose poetry emerges from genuine devotion rather than literary ambition alone, narrates Gurudevan’s life from birth to mahāsamādhi with clarity and care. He preserves both the spiritual depth and cultural uniqueness of the Guru’s story. The poem’s pure language, steady rhythm, and graceful tone make it a spiritual treasure. It offers even lay readers an engaging and beautiful way to absorb the Guru’s profound legacy.

In short, the poems praising Sree Narayana Guru form a small yet luminous body within Malayalam literature. They stand at a meeting point between poetry, devotion, and social reform. These verses, whether written by Kumaran Asan

or others, are more than acts of reverence, they represent the spirit of Kerala's renaissance. Through vivid imagery and heartfelt language, the poets portray Guru as a radiant sun who dispelled the darkness that once enveloped the land. As readers, engaging with these works allows us to witness how one remarkable life became a source of lasting literary inspiration.

Recap

- Kumaran Asan's bond with Sree Narayana Guru shaped his life and art.
- *Gurustavam* (1916) celebrated Guru's 60th birthday (*Śaṣṭiābdapūrti*).
- Its line "Whatever be the religion, man should be good" captured Guru's universalism.
- The hymn's seven-verse form became a daily household prayer.
- *Swami Thirunāl Vañcippāṭṭu* recasts the boat-song metre to praise Guru.
- The poem compares Guru to Buddha (non-violence) and ancient sages (tapas).
- It ends with the mantra "Gurur Brahma … param Brahma," equating Guru with the Absolute.
- *Gurupādashakam* is a ten-verse surrender at the Guru's feet, hailing him as *kāmadhenū*.
- Asan's *maṅgalaslokas* consistently liken Guru to the rising sun dispelling ignorance.
- C.V. Kunhiraman's *Swami Chaithanyam* depicts caste barriers collapsing at Guru's ashram.
- Pulaya boys garlanding high-caste visitors symbolise social reversal.
- Pandit K.P. Karuppan saluted Guru as *Lokāchārya* and translated *Nirvṛti Pañcakam*.
- Karuppan's *Jātikkummi* ridicules caste as a man-made fiction.
- Bodheswaran composed an elegy on Guru's *samādhi* in 1928, vowing the message lives on.
- Vallathol and Tagore, though not disciples, publicly admired Guru's simplicity and wisdom.
- Guru-praising poems merge bhakti with bold social commentary.

- Metaphors of light vs. darkness recur across authors and genres.
- Recitations at *kavi sammelans* circulated Guru's ideas before mass media.
- *Gurustavam* popularised the affectionate title "Gurudeva".
- The verses fostered unity among SNDP followers and other marginalised groups.
- Literary praise positioned Guru as Kerala's moral and cultural renaissance leader.
- Boat-song rhythms made hymns easy to memorise for village audiences.
- Asan's later *khaṇḍa kāvyas* (*Duravastha*, *Chandalabhikshuki*) extend Guru's egalitarian ethos.
- Poets outside Kerala, e.g., Tagore, reinforced Guru's pan-Indian stature.
- Recent epics like *Gurupātham* continue the tradition of guru-centric devotional verse.
- Guru's ideals of education, unity and compassion remain relevant against modern bigotry.
- Poetry proved a powerful tool for disseminating reformist spirituality.
- The unit demonstrates literature's role in bridging personal devotion and public activism.

Objective Questions

1. Who authored *Gurustavam*?
2. What single-word Sanskrit term names Guru's 60th-birthday observance?
3. Which genre best describes *Swami Thirunāl Vañcippāṭṭu*?
4. Name the ten-verse hymn at the Guru's feet.
5. Which journalist-poet wrote *Swami Chaithanyam*?
6. Who penned the elegy when Guru passed away?

7. Karuppan's caste-satire poem?
8. Nobel laureate who praised Guru after meeting him?
9. Sanskrit/English compound term for "devotion to the Guru"?
10. In the mantra quoted by Asan, Guru is ultimately "param _____"?

Answers

1. Kumaranasan
2. Śaṣṭiābdapūrti
3. Vañcippāṭṭu
4. Gurupādashakam
5. Kunhiraman
6. Bodheswaran
7. Jātikkummi
8. Tagore
9. Gurubhakti
10. Brahma

Assignments

1. Examine how Kumaran Asan fuses devotional imagery and social critique in *Gurustavam* and *Swami Thirunāl Vañcippāṭṭu*.
2. "A radiant sun against the darkness of caste." Discuss the light–darkness metaphor in Guru-praising poetry with examples.
3. Trace the evolution of guru-bhakti poetry from Asan to contemporary works like *Gurupātham*, highlighting thematic continuities and shifts.
4. Assess the contribution of non-disciple poets (e.g., C.V. Kunhiraman, K.P. Karuppan) to the literary construction of Guru as social reformer.
5. Analyse the role of poetic recitation and print culture in spreading Sree Narayana Guru's ideals before electronic media.
6. Compare *Jātikkummi* and *Gurupādashakam* in their treatment of caste and spirituality, noting differences in tone, form and audience strategy.

UNIT

Depiction of Guru in Fiction

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- identify Malayalam works portraying Guru and their authors
- explain challenges in fictionalising Guru's life and message
- analyse caste reform, humanism in Guru-based fiction
- evaluate influence of *Guru*, *Gurumanasam* on literature

Prerequisites

Kerala's literary landscape underwent a deep transformation in the decades after Sree Narayana Guru (1855–1928) rose as the foremost voice of caste reform and spiritual humanism. While the Guru himself composed concise philosophical verse such as *Ātmopadeśa Śatakam*, his life and ideas soon became a cultural reference point for writers responding to the moral upheavals of the Kerala Renaissance. Early poetic tributes by disciples like Kumaran Asan and Vallathol praised him as a radiant liberator of the oppressed. At the same time, they marked a broader shift: literature was no longer the sole domain of upper-caste elites. It had become a shared space for addressing issues of equality, learning and human dignity.

As print technology advanced and readers diversified, a desire grew to portray the Guru's life in more detailed narrative forms. This led novelists, short-story writers and dramatists to revisit key episodes, Chempazhanthy childhood stories, the

1888 Aruvippuram consecration, the Sivagiri pilgrimage, through storytelling techniques that highlighted character, dialogue and internal struggle.

This unit follows this journey from devotional chronicle to full narrative fiction. Authors began to balance devotion with realism, carefully navigating the space between reverence and critique. Notable works such as K. Surendran's award-winning novel *Guru* (1994) and Irinchiyam Ravi's extensive *Gurumanasam* place the Guru among a circle of historical figures --Ayyankali, Chattampi Swamikal, colonial officers --- while examining how everyday people experienced the waves of caste reform and spiritual renewal.

More experimental efforts like M. K. Harikumar's *Sreenarayanaya*, written as a "special-edition" magazine, explore the very question of authorship: who has the right to speak for such a public icon? By comparing and situating these texts within the historical moment they both reflect and reimagine, this unit prepares learners to assess their narrative choices, recurring themes and the broader literary and cultural impact of blending fiction with reformist spirituality.

Key themes

Biographical novel, Surendran, Gurumanasam, Historical fiction, Intercaste marriage, Renaissance literature, Characterisation

Discussion

Sree Narayana Guru's remarkable life, marked by spiritual quests, social reform, and acts of compassion, naturally invites literary exploration. Yet capturing such a figure in fiction presents a creative challenge. Writers must strike a careful balance between factual respect and imaginative storytelling. In Malayalam literature, several authors have attempted to portray Guru's character and influence through novels, short stories, and plays. This unit explores such representations and reflects on their thematic value.

6.3.1 *Guru* – The Biographical Novel by K. Surendran

One of the most important fictional works about Sree Narayana Guru is the Malayalam novel *Guru* by K. Surendran. Published in 1994, the book is a fictionalised biography that seeks to bring the Guru's life and teachings into a compelling narrative form. Surendran, a well-regarded novelist and scholar, traces the Guru's journey from childhood as Nanu in Chempazhanthy to his later years as a guiding figure in Kerala's renaissance. The novel explores both his internal spiritual struggles and the external social obstacles he overcame, as well as the lasting impact he had on others.

In this novel, Surendran presents Narayana Guru as a real, relatable character rather than a distant saint. He feels the pain of caste-based injustice, experiences doubt and insight, and

shows gentle humour and compassion. While staying faithful to major historical milestones --- such as the Aruvippuram Shiva installation in 1888, the founding of the Sivagiri pilgrimage, and meetings with Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi - the novel also imaginatively enters the Guru's inner world. This creative licence allows readers to engage with Guru's thoughts and emotions in ways that factual accounts may not offer. The novel received the Vayalar Award in 1995, acknowledging its literary quality and its success in making Guru's life accessible to a wider audience.

Beyond Surendran's full-length novel, Guru has appeared in other fictional works, sometimes in less direct ways. Some Malayalam short stories and plays include characters inspired by the Guru's ideals, even if they do not mention him by name.

Surendran's writing style is thoughtful and measured, reflecting the calm character of Guru himself. His prose often includes lyrical passages that describe the landscape of Kerala, evoking the natural beauty that Guru himself cherished. These vivid images give the story a strong sense of place. At the same time, the novel explores the spiritual thoughts and reflections of the Guru, which calls for careful imagination. Surendran handles this responsibility with care, making the imagined moments feel believable and true to the Guru's known values.

For example, in one imagined episode, a young Guru sees his close friend, a Pulaya boy, publicly humiliated due to untouchability. The novel describes how this moment filled Guru's heart with sorrow and sparked a silent rebellion within him. Although the event may be fictional, it reflects the spirit of Guru's later actions. Here, fiction adds emotional insight and helps the reader understand the possible roots of his commitment to justice.

Guru received wide critical acclaim and won the prestigious Vayalar Award in 1994, confirming its place as an important work in Malayalam literature. Critics admired the way the novel wove philosophy into its narrative. Surendran incorporated the teachings of Narayana Guru - drawing inspiration from works like *Atmopadesa Satakam* and *Daiva Dasakam* - into dialogues and inner reflections. This allows readers to absorb Guru's ideas naturally, as part of the unfolding story. In one chapter, Surendran imagines a midnight conversation between Guru and a disciple beneath a starlit sky, where Guru explains the essence of advaita (non-duality) using gentle and clear metaphors. Scenes like this bring abstract philosophy into the world of human feeling and interaction.

By telling Guru's story in the form of a novel, Surendran made the saint's life accessible to many people, including those who might not turn to history books or philosophical texts. Readers often say that through this novel, they felt as if they had come face to face with Guru himself. This shows the strength of fiction in building personal connections with figures from the past. The novel does not avoid conflict either. It shows the resistance Guru faced from casteists, the doubt from some within his own community, and even his moments of inner struggle. In doing so, it presents Guru as deeply human without taking away from his spiritual greatness. This delicate balance is the strength of effective biographical fiction.

Guru is more than just a fictional account of a historical figure. It explores Sreenarayana Guru as someone whose inner transformation calls for the

imaginative freedom of fiction. Surendran himself described the novel's origin as deeply personal. The idea was first sparked by a radio programme in 1974. Years later, a friend, T. N. Jayachandran, encouraged him to write a more creative and imaginative work rather than a traditional biography. Around the same time, Surendran was also influenced by his daughter's growing interest in philosophy. These small but meaningful nudges eventually led him to write the novel.

A central question the novelist faced was this: why create a fictional version of a life that has already been told through biographies? He answered by pointing to the limits of factual writing. A biography, he argued, can rarely reach into the hidden life of the spirit, the deep transformation that turned a quiet village man into a revered siddha. He compared this mystery to the unknown years in the life of Christ. To explore such spaces, he believed, one needs the freedom of imagination.

Surendran described his work not as a simple retelling of facts but as a sincere attempt to reach spiritual truth. He said that his aim was to present a vision of truth - not built on fantasy, but on a searching imagination guided by humility. He called himself a seeker. His novel, then, is not meant to replace historical study. It is an artistic companion to it, offering a way to glimpse the inner world of a great spiritual teacher. For the reader, this becomes an invitation to reflection, perhaps even self-purification.

6.3.2 *Gurumanasam*

Another important fictional portrayal is Irinchiyam Ravi's acclaimed novel *Gurumanasam*. It presents a moving account of the social and spiritual awakening that took place in Kerala during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At the centre of this transformation stands Sreenarayana Guru, portrayed as the intellectual and moral force behind the era's progress. The novel goes beyond historical events. It captures the depth of Gurudevan's philosophy and the way it worked in real life. This blend gives the book its emotional strength and quiet radiance.

The narrative brings together a wide range of influential social and spiritual reformers who, alongside Gurudevan, devoted themselves to building a more equal society. These include key figures such as Ayyankali, a pioneering advocate for Dalit rights; Vaikunthaswami, one of the earliest champions of social reform; Chattambi Swamikal, a spiritual guide and contemporary of Gurudevan; Reverend Father George Mathan, remembered for founding the first school for formerly enslaved communities; and the ascetic Omalan, a Dalit and former slave who performed a consecration to Shiva before Gurudevan did. Also present is Arattupuzha Velayudha Panikkar, a bold and fearless leader who stood against caste discrimination. He was the earliest reformer to have established a Shiva Temple(1854) at Mangalam for the marginalised communities in the history of Kerala.

By including this constellation of historical personalities, the novel captures the shared effort and intellectual collaboration that defined the Kerala Renaissance. The novel's attention to Gurudevan's "darshanangal" (philosophies) and "prayogangal" (practical actions) not only reinforces his central role in the reform movement but also shows how his ideas formed the foundation for a wide range of social and spiritual awakenings. Through this layered portrayal, *Gurumanasam* becomes a valuable literary exploration

of a crucial chapter in Kerala's history. It demonstrates the power of clear moral and spiritual leadership in bringing about lasting social change.

6.3.3 Other Works

M.K. Harikumar's *Sreenarayanaya* stands out as a novel that reimagines how we understand the philosophies of Sreenarayana Gurudevan. Rather than presenting a straightforward biography, Harikumar adopts an imaginative narrative form that explores the spiritual journey towards divine realisation. The novel moves beyond academic explanation, focusing instead on the lived experience of Gurudevan's teachings. Harikumar becomes a seeker of truth himself, using the Guru's path and hidden inner struggles to lead the reader into deeper insight.

The novel presents Gurudevan not only as a historical leader but as the creator of a new system of knowledge and way of life. Harikumar does not merely recount events, he probes into the heart of Gurudevan's worldview and expresses it with lyrical depth and clarity. The narrative challenges familiar ways of seeing reality and encourages readers to reflect on the meaning of truth and divinity. In doing so, the novel becomes not just a novel, but a spiritual work, showing that the Guru's revolutionary ideas emerged from a unique way of thinking that moved beyond existing doctrines.

Harikumar employs a postmodern style, presenting the novel as a special edition magazine, complete with imagined contributions from fifteen fictional writers. This format allows for a multi-layered exploration of Gurudevan's philosophy and suggests that understanding him is never complete but always growing. The creative structure blends literary innovation with spiritual reflection, offering readers a fresh and powerful way to engage with this iconic figure.

Subhash Chandran's acclaimed novel 'Manushyanu Oru Amugham' (A Preface to Man), written in the twenty-first century, offers a compelling social critique. It suggests that the breakdown of social harmony in the later part of the twentieth century in Kerala stems, in part, from the absence of the kind of transformative leadership once embodied by Sreenarayana Gurudevan. The novel, which traces several generations of the Ayattumpilli family, portrays the persistence of caste-based prejudice even into the 1950s. Through the fictional village of Thachanakkara, the novel holds up a mirror to Kerala's social realities. The patriarch, Narapillai, believes his Nair status places him above reformers such as Gurudevan and Ayyankali. But the narrative gradually challenges and dismantles this view, as Narapillai's children reject caste norms - his son marries into the Ezhava community, and his daughters choose partners who refuse caste and religious labels.

This powerful story shows the rise of progressive values and the collapse of outdated social beliefs. Beyond the question of caste, the novel also reflects on knowledge and human potential. Through thoughtful conversations between characters like Kuttipuzha Krishnapilla and Menon Mash, it suggests that real greatness lies not in intellect alone but in a compassionate heart. One striking image captures this truth: young Govindan retrieves books that his father had thrown into the river, a gesture described as a sacrifice to claim the fatherhood of knowledge. This symbolic act of reclaiming learning reflects the spirit of Kerala's intellectual awakening.

The novel ends with a memorable scene in which Govindan and his wife Sulochana display portraits of Sreenarayana Guru and Chattambi Swami in their home. This image represents the coming together of tradition and modernity, of social justice and spiritual wisdom. It affirms the core message of the novel, that the values Gurudevan stood for remain essential to social progress, and that neglecting them leads to the problems still present in Kerala today.

The novel shows a clear connection to Gurudevan's philosophical writings, especially *Jati Nirnayam* (Determination of Caste) and *Jati Lakshanam* (Definition of Caste). In those works, Gurudevan questioned the foundations of caste as a social system. In a similar way, Subhash Chandran's narrative exposes the senseless nature of caste through the actions and experiences of his characters. The novel reflects the core of Gurudevan's ideas, as shown in Jitendran's letter which states, "Even the great progressives among the Savarnas in the new era, when they meet a new acquaintance, will reveal their caste implicitly within the first five sentences... Our land is about to be filled with such pathetic individuals." These lines echo Gurudevan's message that caste is nothing more than a surface label, and that the deeper issues of prejudice still linger. *Manushyanu Oru Amugham* becomes a continuation of Gurudevan's message, reminding readers that the fight for equality is far from over.

Writers who portray Guru in fiction face a challenge. They must show respect for a revered figure while avoiding idealised stories that lack depth. If the character appears flawless and distant, readers may struggle to engage. Many authors choose to include a fictional observer or disciple who reflects on Guru's life. This character may struggle, make mistakes, or grow through the story. In the novel *Guru*, K. Surendran uses a few such characters, including Kunju, a childhood friend of the young Guru. These characters help the reader connect emotionally with the story and with Guru himself.

A highly regarded novel in this category is *Narayanam* by Perumpadavam Sreedharan. It offers a thoughtful and imaginative view of Sree Narayana Guru, focusing on his inner world as well as his public work. The novel draws attention to the challenges he faced as he worked to reshape Kerala's social and spiritual life.

Narayanam is praised for its graceful language and the way it presents Guru as a real human being. It follows his thoughts, choices, and the trials of carrying out a mission in a society caught in caste-based divisions. It shares his life with modern readers in a way that feels both authentic and relevant. The story honours Guru's legacy and adds to the ongoing literary effort to reflect on his values and influence.

A major hurdle the creative writer has to resolve in designing this genre of fiction is balancing historical accuracy with imaginative storytelling. Events like Guru's meetings with Vivekananda in 1892 and with Gandhi in 1925 are well documented and presented accurately. But in the early years of Guru's life, fewer records exist. In these spaces, writers may create scenes or dialogues. Responsible authors take care not to contradict Guru's values. Instead, they imagine moments that help readers feel the meaning behind his work. For example, a fictional scene might show Guru as a child witnessing a cruel act of untouchability, helping us understand why he spoke so strongly against caste.

Fiction allows writers to explore possibilities. A few short stories explore

what might have happened if Guru had taken a different path. Some ask questions like, "What if Guru had never become a renunciate?" or "What if he had met Chattampi Swamikal earlier?" While these are literary experiments, they often suggest that Guru's chosen path was the one he was meant to walk.

The image of Sree Narayana Guru in Malayalam fiction takes many forms. Some works directly tell his story through novels or plays. Others create characters who reflect Guru's ideals, such as reformers or those who challenge caste. Still others echo his philosophy in their themes and tone. All these forms keep Guru's message alive and meaningful for new generations. Through stories, his life continues to inspire people to think about compassion, justice, and truth.

One modern story that engages with Guru's legacy is S. Hareesh's "Modasthithanayangu Vasippoo Malapole", found in his collection *Adam*. The title of the story is striking. It is a line from Kumaran Asan's poem "Gurusatavam", a hymn of praise to Guru. In this story, the title is not just decorative. It adds meaning and completes the message of the story itself. This creative use of a poetic line shows how Guru's influence still shapes modern Malayalam literature.

The story centres around Pavithra and Anoop, a couple from different communities who are preparing to marry. The main characters include the couple, their families, a Swami from an old story often recalled in conversations, and a photograph that hangs in the porch of Pavithra's home, as well as in the homes of others from her caste. Hareesh's narrative style flows through uninterrupted dialogue, where characters express deeply rooted savarna and avarna attitudes. These views, though often hidden beneath claims of being casteless, emerge subtly within speech. The story gives voice to questions that often arise in televised debates on caste, offering complex and uncomfortable truths through plain conversation.

The narrative reflects a commonly seen social pattern in which a Pulaya tries to rise to the status of an Ezhava, an Ezhava aspires to become a Nair, and a Nair looks up to the Namboothiri. While this mirrors social reality, the author appears - perhaps unintentionally - to suggest that one form of usage, "ആനയെ" (aanaye – elephant), is appropriate, while "ആനേനെ" (aanene – colloquial for elephant) is not. This distinction, though minor on the surface, may open the work to political interpretation or criticism. Hareesh himself has said that when a story receives only praise or only criticism, something may be missing from it. It is notable that no one has yet analysed the author's caste background when discussing this piece, even though such evaluations are not uncommon in literary criticism.

At the heart of the story is the silent but continuous presence of Sree Narayana Guru. The Guru is never named directly. Yet from the beginning to the end, his influence is quietly felt. In the closing lines, the narrator observes that "the two lines of the poem are clearly visible at the very bottom of the photo." At that moment, the reader is invited to turn back and re-read the story's title. In Hareesh's earlier stories, titles often conveyed a sense of helplessness. Here, however, the title offers a quiet poetic justice.

Beyond its political insight, another quality sets this story apart, the quiet amazement it leaves behind. There is wonder in how the author builds a precise and nuanced commentary on caste

without ever raising his voice. The care and restraint with which he shapes the narrative draw the reader in slowly but surely. This subtle craftsmanship is what makes the story stand among the finest of the year.

Sree Narayana Guru continues to be one of the most transformative figures in Kerala's history. Through his teachings and example, he reshaped both spiritual understanding and social order, often through paths both radical and quiet. Hareesh's story draws on that legacy with literary grace.

Recap

- Fiction offers imaginative insight into Guru's inner life beyond factual biography.
- K. Surendran's *Guru* (1994) fictionalises real milestones from Chempazhanthy childhood to Sivagiri pilgrimage.
- *Guru* won the Vayalar Award, signalling mainstream acceptance of Guru-centric fiction.
- Surendran balances reverence with drama by showing Guru through disciples' eyes.
- Irinchiyam Ravi's *Gurumanasam* depicts the Kerala Renaissance with Guru as moral core.
- *Gurumanasam* integrates figures like Ayyankali and Chattampi Swamikal alongside Guru.
- M.K. Harikumar's *Sreenarayanaya* uses post-modern "special-edition" magazine format.
- Harikumar highlights Guru's "new knowledge system and lifestyle".
- Perumpadavam Sreedharan's *Narayanam* focuses on Guru's contemplative journey.
- Pallathu Raman's *Mishrakanta* (1919) pioneered inter-caste marriage theme under Guru's influence.
- Subhash Chandran's *Manushyanu Oru Amugham* laments absence of Guru-like leadership in late-20th-century Kerala.
- Village Thachanakkara becomes microcosm of lingering caste prejudice.
- S. Hareesh's story "Modasthithanayangu Vasippoo Malapole" lifts its title from Kumaran Asan's *Gurustavam*.

- The story shows Guru's unspoken presence in modern social tensions.
- N. Krishna Pillai's play *Sree Narayana Guru* dramatizes key debates and consecrations on stage.
- Fiction authors often introduce fallible narrators to keep Guru from becoming a static icon.
- Unknown gaps in Guru's early life invite creative but responsible speculation.
- Accurate portrayal of events like the 1888 Aruvippuram consecration anchors credibility.
- Viewpoint-shifts humanise Guru, revealing empathy, humour and doubt.
- Guru acts as catalyst—his brief appearances trigger other characters' transformations.
- Light-versus-dark symbolism is a recurring metaphor for caste oppression and enlightenment.
- Fiction extends Guru's ideals to readers who may not approach philosophical texts.
- Literary depictions help embed Guru's message of equality into Kerala's collective imagination.
- Critics praise works that weave passages from *Ātmopadeśa Śatakam* into dialogue or monologue.
- Challenges include avoiding hagiography while maintaining spiritual authenticity.
- Alternate-history tales explore "what-ifs" while usually reaffirming Guru's chosen path.
- Guru's presence—direct or symbolic—has become a touchstone for Malayalam social novels.
- Through narrative art, the saint's call for compassion, unity and truth remains culturally vibrant.

Objective Questions

1. What is the name of Guru's birth-village?
2. In which year did the Aruvippuram consecration take place?
3. What is the title of the post-modern novel on Guru by M. K. Harikumar?
4. Which Kerala-renaissance novel on Guru was written by Irinchiyam Ravi?
5. Which literary award was won by Surendran's *Guru*?
6. Which 1919 novel pioneered the theme of inter-caste marriage?
7. Which Dalit reformer appears in *Gurumanasam*?
8. What is the name of the fictional village symbolising caste bias in Subhash Chandran's novel?
9. Who is the writer of the short story echoing Asan's line?
10. Which of Guru's philosophical works is often quoted in these fictions?

Answers

1. Chempazhanthy
2. 1888
3. *Sreenarayanaya*
4. *Gurumanasam*
5. Vayalar
6. *Mishrakanta*
7. Ayyankali
8. Thachanakkara
9. Hareesh
10. *Atmopadesha*

Assignments

1. Contrast Surendran's dramatic focus with Ravi's panoramic vision in portraying Guru.
2. Show how Harikumar's magazine-format novel reshapes the biographical genre.
3. Analyse the recurring light–dark symbolism in two Guru-inspired stories.
4. Explain how secondary characters expose caste tension in *Mishrakanta*.
5. Identify intertextual echoes of Guru's verse in contemporary fiction.
6. Assess the ethical risks of turning a revered saint into a fictional protagonist.

Reference

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3. Nair, Vettoor Raman. "ദിവാൻജി" (*"Divanji"*). In *Vettoor Raman Nair's Short Stories*. Kozhikode: Mathrubhumi Books, 1972. *(Short story featuring a character's encounter with Guru.)*
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5. Balakrishnan, P.K. *Narayana Guru* (Malayalam; essays blended with narrative). Kottayam: D.C. Books, 2024. *(Though not fiction, this collection of essays by P.K. Balakrishnan uses creative narration to portray Guru in mosaic, reflecting how factual and fictional narratives intertwine in understanding Guru.)*

BLOCK - 6

Guru's Ideals as a Source of Inspiration for Future Writers

UNIT

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- identify Guru's reformist ideals influencing Malayalam literary works
- explain disciples' literary reflections of Guru's core teachings
- analyse Guru's impact on Kerala Progressive Writers' Movement
- evaluate Guru's message in poetry, drama, biographical literature

Prerequisites

In the rich cultural and intellectual history of Kerala, few figures have had as deep and lasting social influence as that of Sree Narayana Guru. Emerging in the times of strong caste oppression and social stagnation, Guru offered a bold but compassionate vision of equality, spiritual growth and social reform. His message, "One Caste, One Religion, One God for all," was not just a philosophical view but a revolutionary plan that challenged the foundations of social hierarchy. His approach combined Advaitic spirituality with a practical ethic based on compassion, education and dignity. Through his founding of schools, temples and the SNDP Yogam, he redefined religious practice and spiritual leadership as tools for community upliftment. His literary works—clear, powerful and accessible—provided a model of how great truths could be shared in everyday language, thus making wisdom available to all. His influence was spread not just through his writings and teachings, but more deeply through the social awakening he helped to inspire.

As Kerala entered the twentieth century, Guru's ideals found strong expression in the writings of his followers and admirers. Writers like Kumaranasan, Sahodaran Ayyappan, Pandit Karuppan and Muloor S. Padmanabha Panicker became leading voices of his vision, addressing themes such as caste reform, social unity and human dignity in both poetry and prose. Their work carried forward Guru's mission, turning literature into a space for justice and progress. Even beyond his direct circle, his philosophy shaped the work of progressive writers and dramatists who spoke for the marginalised. His impact spread across many forms of expression—from hymns and devotional songs to realist novels, biographical writing and even stage performances like Kathaprasangam. In this way, Guru's ideals gave structure and direction to much of Kerala's literary renaissance. This unit examines how his ideas inspired several generations of writers and helped shape the ethical and creative foundation of Malayalam literature into the modern era.

Key themes

"One Caste, One Religion, One God", Social Reform Literature, Sahodaran Ayyappan, Pandit Karuppan, Progressive Writers, Caste Critique, Rationalism, Bhakti and Humanism, SNDP, Renaissance Ideals

Discussion

Sree Narayana Guru's influence on literature did not end with those who had personal contact with him. His thoughts and values continued to guide later generations of writers in Kerala. His teachings - social equality, the rejection of caste, the value of education, the pursuit of spiritual truth beyond rituals, and compassion for all - echoed in the works of poets, essayists, and novelists for decades after his time.

6.4.1 The Immediate Generation after Guru

The first group to carry forward Guru's vision in literature consisted of his direct disciples and close associates who lived beyond his time. Many of them were active in the period between the 1920s and 1940s. They used writing as a tool for social change, in full alignment with Guru's philosophy of progress through education and awareness.

From their very first meeting, Guru's insight recognised the deep and natural talents within Kumaru. Like iron drawn to a magnet, Guru's presence created a profound shift in Kumaranasan. After a short conversation, Gurudevan asked, 'നിനക്ക് നമ്മുടെ കൂടെ കൂടാൻ സമ്മതമാണോ?' (Are you willing to join us?). Kumaru responded at once, 'എനിക്കു സമ്മതംതന്നെ' (I am certainly willing). From then on, Kumaru stayed with Guru and accompanied him everywhere for the next three years. After the completion of his further studies under the patronage of Dr. Palpu, when he worked as the founder secretary of SNDP Yogam, Kumaru visited Gurudevan whenever he could. Between them

grew a rare and noble guru-disciple bond. Kumaru would recite his poems before Gurudevan. Seeing his gift, Gurudevan advised him not to focus on romantic themes. This suggestion gave Kumaru a new path in poetry. This was how the Guru initiated him to the world of the great reformative poetry to make him celebrate his talent in Malayalam litertaure.

After the consecration of the Kolathukara temple, Gurudevan offered Kumaru a poetic challenge. He gave him the first line of a verse: 'കോലത്തുകരെക്കുടികൊണ്ടരുളും ബാലപ്പിറ ചൂടിയ വാരിധിയേ'(*Oh Ocean, residing in Kolathukara, wearing the crescent moon on your head...*) He asked Kumaru to complete it. Kumaranasan's well-known reply was: 'കാലൻ കനിവറ്റു കുറിച്ചുവിടു-ന്നോലപ്പടിയെന്നെയയയ്ക്കരുതേ'.(*May the merciless Yama's decree, written on his palm leaf, not be sent to me*).

At the age of eighteen, Kumaranasan accepted Gurudevan's invitation and arrived at Aruvippuram in 1891, where he stayed for three years. While Gurudevan initiated other early disciples such as Kochappipilla, Arumanoor Nanu, and Narayanan Pillai into monastic life, giving them names like Sivalingadas, Nischaladas, and Chaitanya Swami, he took a different approach with Kumaru. He called him 'Chinnaswami' (little swami), treating him as both a spiritual son and a devoted follower. Gurudevan did not intend to make him a monk but wanted him to develop as a social and cultural contributor.

Gurudevan guided Kumaranasan towards experiences and areas of learning that were out of reach even for those from wealthy or privileged backgrounds. Some may ask why Gurudevan did not initiate Kumaru into brahmacharya (celibacy), or why he did not train him to be a monk, choosing instead to send him for further education in Bangalore, Madras, and Calcutta. Others may wonder why he was never given sannyasa diksha. Gurudevan's answer lay in his method. Only those whom he felt were truly meant to lead a renunciate life were included in the monastic path. Yet he saw all his followers, both monks and householders, as equal in value. In fact, most of those who shared and spread Guru's message were disciples who lived as householders.

To support Kumaranasan's development, Gurudevan asked Dr Palpu to help him pursue advanced studies. Among his suggestions was this: 'We need many young people among us who are brave and well-educated. Youngsters with an aptitude for education should be chosen and taught.' From their first meeting, Gurudevan welcomed Kumaru, recognised his poetic talent, and created the space for him to grow in wisdom, life experience, and creative power. In doing so, he helped shape one of Kerala's greatest poets.

Kumaranasan famously wrote a letter to Gurudevan requesting permission to marry, composed in four Sanskrit verses. This work, known as 'Oru Samarpanam'(A Dedication), reflects the rare closeness and spiritual depth of their bond. It begins with the verse:

I worship the great Ishwara, whose form is found in the signs of the Guru's feet, fulfilling the belief that the Guru is the Supreme One.

In the fourth verse, Kumaranasan gently puts forward his request:

Although this decision is mine, may it be accepted with your affection for your disciple. O Guru, this is my first request, made with bowed head and folded hands, out of devotion.

This final verse reveals the depth of humility and respect with which Kumaranasan placed his request at the feet of his beloved Guru.

As part of the preparations, a large portrait of Gurudevan was worshipped for forty-one days. On the day of Shashtipoorthi, the portrait was taken in procession to the new building and honoured with pujas and bhajans. On Chathayam, the day marked by Gurudevan's birth star, a community feast was held from nine o'clock in the morning. In Kaithamukku alone, more than one hundred para of rice were cooked, which fed over ten thousand people. This shows the enormous scale of the celebration. A grand procession began at seven in the evening and continued past midnight. Many similar gatherings took place in other regions as well.

Among the distinguished guests present were A. R. Rajarajavarma Thampuran, Diwan Bahadur Govinda Pillai, Mahakavi Ulloor S. Parameswara Iyer, Mr Viyara (Government Chief Secretary), Subrahmanya Iyer (Diwan Peshkar), District Judge P. Raman Thampi, Diwan Peshkar R. Mahadeva Iyer, Head Government Vakil Anantharavu, and Retired Judge P. Krishnapillai.

On the subject of Kumaranasan's marriage, Gurudevan once remarked, "Can't someone who has eaten wheat for so many years now eat rice?" This gentle statement expressed that someone who had reflected on worldly life for long enough was now ready to live it. After resigning from his post as Secretary of the S. N. D. P. Yogam and entering family life, Kumaranasan continued to receive guidance and support from Gurudevan. He was appointed as the manager of the Aluva Advaita Ashram High School, a position that reflected Guru's ongoing trust in his disciple.

6.4.2 Sahodaran K. Ayyappan (1889–1968)

Ayyappan, often affectionately called Sahodaran (meaning "Brother"), was a devoted follower of Sree Narayana Guru and perhaps the most daring in interpreting Guru's message of one caste and one religion. He gave it an even more radical form - "no caste, no religion, no God for mankind" --emphasising complete social equality and a secular humanist outlook.

Ayyappan was a prolific writer. His work in both prose and poetry reflects the deep influence of Gurudevan's thought. In 1917, he organised a revolutionary event called *misra-bhojanam* (inter-dining), where people from different castes dined together. This act, considered shocking at the time, was openly blessed by Sree Narayana Guru, signalling his support for Ayyappan's bold and inclusive vision.

To further spread his ideas, Ayyappan started the journal *Sahodaran*, and later *Yukthivadi*. Through these platforms, he strongly criticised caste discrimination and religious superstition in sharp and fearless language.

6.4.3 Literary Figures of North Malabar

In the northern part of Kerala (Malabar), the Thiyya community, closely related to the Ezhavas, produced several writers who drew inspiration from the wave of reform led by Sree Narayana Guru. One such figure was Vaghbhatananda Guru, who founded the *Atmavidya Sangham* (Society of Self-Realisation). He wrote

and published works aimed at spiritual and social advancement, deeply rooted in the rational and reflective spirituality inspired by Guru.

Among poets from the region, P. Kunhiraman Nair, though not Thiyya by birth, lived and wrote in Malabar and was deeply influenced by the humanism that flowed from Guru's teachings. His poem 'Mannu, Vinnu' (Earth and Sky are one) beautifully expresses a sense of cosmic unity that strongly echoes Guru's message of oneness.

6.4.4 Literary Figures of North Malabar

Mooloor, who composed the 'Kavi Ramayanam' as a protest against the neglect of poets from lower castes, unintentionally overlooked an important group. He did not mention many of the well-known poets of North Malabar who lived during the same period. This may not be entirely surprising. At that time, the idea of a united Kerala had not yet taken shape. Mooloor, a subject of a traditionally conservative princely state, might have viewed British-ruled Malabar as separate and distant.

In Chapter 20 of the fourth volume of *'Kerala Sahithya Charitham'*, Ulloor notes that many non-Brahmins contributed to the growth of literature in prose and poetry in North Kerala during the middle of the eleventh century. What stands out is that the majority of these non-Brahmin writers were not from upper castes either. Such a high ratio of lower caste contributors is difficult to find in any other region or era in literary history. This points to the value of social history when exploring the development of literature.

North Kerala was among the first regions where it became clear that caste had no bearing on literary quality. This shift resulted from external political interventions. Tipu Sultan's 18th-century control of Malabar significantly altered its rigid social order. After Tipu, Malabar came under direct British rule, unlike Travancore and Cochin, which remained princely states under British suzerainty.

This administrative difference spurred major reforms. British Malabar abolished many outdated customs and legal codes, while Travancore and Cochin maintained them. Consequently, lower caste communities in British Malabar saw significant social improvements: slavery abolition, education access, public movement freedom, and new employment.

The Thiyya community benefited most. Many joined government schools, achieving professional success. In contrast, conservative upper castes showed less interest in modern education. While Travancore Ezhavas sought minor jobs, Malabar Thiyyas attained influential positions like Deputy Collectors. This social rise directly impacted Thiyya cultural and literary contributions.

Though earlier Thiyya generations had Sanskrit and poetic training, few gained prominence under Hindu kings. British rule changed this, opening literature to all. Increased education, widespread printing, and journals encouraged writing. Educated, talented Thiyyas quickly established themselves, moving from translations to original compositions.

In essence, direct British administration in North Kerala, following Tipu Sultan's disruptions, created a more equitable social environment. This fostered unprecedented opportunities for marginalized communities, especially the Thiyyas. Their socio-economic upliftment, driven by access to modern education and public life,

directly translated into significant literary contributions, proving that talent could flourish irrespective of caste when traditional barriers were dismantled.

Their literary style often mirrored that of upper caste writers, especially in poetry. Rather than trying to create a new literary form, they focused on earning a place in a world that had long denied them entry. By the second half of the nineteenth century, poets and artists from the Thiyya community began appearing in greater numbers, writing works that rivalled those of their upper caste counterparts. The most prominent among them were Kakkuzhi Kunji Pappu Gurukkal, Narikuri Unneerikutty Vaidyan, Karayi Krishnan Gurukkal, and Madayi Mandan Gurukkal.

Kunjibappu Gurukkal (1826–1908) was born in Kakuzhi, a tharavaadu in Thalassery. He attained advanced knowledge in both Sanskrit and Malayalam. When a vacancy opened for a Malayalam Pandit at the Brennan District School, he was appointed to the post. Passionate about arts and culture, he established the first Kathakali troupe for the Thiyya community.

By maintaining cordial relations with the British, Kunjibappu Gurukkal became a respected figure in Thalassery. He co-authored the book 'Grammar Questions and Answers' with Mr Garthwaite, a work which earned him some recognition, though many of his writings are not known today. Still, the surviving texts offer insight into his poetic talent. His known works include 'Harishchandracharitham', 'Sheethankan Thullal', 'Bhagavad Gita Kilippattu', and a poetic adaptation of 'Aesop's Moral Tales'. In the field of thullal, he is considered one of the significant successors of Kunchan Nambiar.

6.4.5 Unneerikutty Vaidyan (1848–1909)

Unneerikutty Vaidyan was born into a Thiyya family known for its medical tradition in Kozhikode. He was educated through the traditional Gurukula system. Vaidyan gained expertise in Sanskrit and later pursued advanced studies in grammar and logic under M. Venkata Subrahmanya Iyer. His poetic works followed established classical models. Among his compositions, 'Harishchandracharitham Manipravalam', written in epic style, holds a special place. Chathukudi Mannadiyar wrote of this poem: "This work, which beautifully blends eloquent Sanskrit and Malayalam words, richly decorated with puns and rhymes, brings great joy to readers." However, the mixed and densely layered use of Sanskrit and Malayalam may have made it difficult for some readers to follow.

In addition to this, he composed works such as "Pazhayaniyandavaswamikirth anam", "Guruvayupureshasthothram", "Nalacharitham Kaikottikkalippattu", and "Nalleeshwarashtakam". He also translated Bhartrihari's "Neethishatakam" into Malayalam.

6.4.6 Karayi Krishnan Gurukkal (1855–1887)

Karayi Krishnan Gurukkal was born into the Othayoth family in Chirakkal Taluk, North Malabar. He was a noted poet and scholar who lived only until the age of thirty-two. Despite his short life, he produced more than six literary works described as having nectar-like quality. His major works include: 'Rukmini Parinayam Manipravalam', 'Ramayanam Manipravalam', 'Lakshmana Parinayam Ottan Thullal', 'Kuchela Krishnaneeyam', 'Yamaka Kavyam', 'Adithyasthavam', 'Alankarashastra

Prakarane Bhadraakhyaanam Bhasha Vyaakhyaanam', and 'Upamaalankara Prakarane Bhadraakhyaanam Bhasha Vyaakhyaanam'. Sadly, many of these works are no longer available. P. Govinda Pillai, the first literary historian of Malayalam, quoted several of these writings and referred to Gurukkal as a "great scholar". Later, Ulloor, in his detailed history of Malayalam literature, remarked, "I have not had the opportunity to see many of these."

6.4.7 Madayi Mandan Gurukkal (1830–1862)

Madayi Mandan Gurukkal was born into an old Thiyya family in Thalassery, North Malabar. He received his education in Sanskrit language and literature from scholars within his own community. Despite his short life, he gained recognition as a respected poet. His main works include 'Nalacharitham Kavyam', 'Pathivratha Dharmam', and the unfinished 'Parvathi Parinaym Kavyam'. Ulloor observed that after Kunchan Nambiar's 'Sree Krishna Charitham', the only other poem in that particular style was Mandan Gurukkal's 'Nalacharitham'.

6.4.8 Other Notable Poets

Several other poets gained recognition during their lifetime but are now only faintly remembered:

1. Meloottu Kunjikkannan Gurukkal
2. Punathoor Raman Gurukkal, who wrote 'Uttara Swayamvaram Ottan Thullal'
3. Kunjikuttan Master, known for 'Upakoshacharitham' and 'Dhruva Charitham Attakatha'
4. Madavil Valiya Kunjiraman Vaidyar (998–1064), author of 'Tadaka Swayamvaram Ottan Thullal'
5. Manakkadan Kunjambu
6. Manakkadan Ramunni

This entry of poets from lower castes into the literary domain marks a distinctive moment in Kerala's cultural history. These individuals, often from well-off families with some access to traditional learning, advanced to the same level as upper caste writers within a newly developing cultural climate. By following the styles of the upper castes, they forged a new identity in literature, art, and culture.

This transformation was not revolutionary in the strict sense. Through imitation rather than open resistance, they entered the once-restricted world of feudal culture. This can be described as a kind of Sanskritisation in the literary field. Still, it is important to remember that the tradition they embraced was already in decline. A true renaissance does not come from preserving decaying customs, but from challenging them, as will be further explored in the next chapter.

However, this imitation carried a quiet power. These writers made it difficult for conservative institutions to ignore the truth, that given the chance, someone from an untouchable caste could participate in the arts and literature alongside a privileged Namboothiri. This confidence inspired those who later led Kerala's literary and social renaissance. They understood that they were in no way less than others, and that even the so-called divine figures were part of a fading order.

The real renaissance did not happen when Puthanmaran composed verses modelled on 'Ambopadesham'. It began when the next generation, through works like 'Veenapoovu', challenged both those

models and the values behind them.

In the rich land of Indian literary and intellectual history, certain figures emerge as enduring sources of inspiration, deeply influencing later generations of writers. Just as Mahatma Gandhi's ideals stirred poets and thinkers across the country, and spiritual leaders like Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo Maharshi, and Rabindranath Tagore inspired profound philosophical thought, Sreenarayana Guru stands apart as a towering presence whose ideas and ideals shaped Malayalam literature, especially poetry. His influence is examined in depth in Vellayani Arjunan's *Guruvinte Thirumumpil* (Cultural Essays on Sree Narayana Guru), which explores the 'Radiance of the Guru's Influence on Poetry and Literature'.

Gurudevan's unique contribution was to awaken the people of South India, particularly Kerala, from a deep spiritual slumber, leading them towards modern thinking and progressive life values. This spiritual and intellectual awakening became a powerful inspiration for many South Indian writers, social thinkers, reformers, and cultural leaders. A remarkable body of poetry - including short verses, narrative pieces, and full-scale epics - emerged in homage to Gurudevan. Prominent poets such as Kumaranasan, Ulloor S. Parameswara Iyer, Vallathol Narayana Menon, Mooloor S. Padmanabha Panicker, K. P. Karuppan, Pallathuraman, Sahodaran Ayyappan, Puthuppalli P. K. Panicker, G. Shankarakurup, Vailoppilli Sreedhara Menon, and M. P. Appan gave poetic voice to Gurudevan's clear vision and transformative social ideas. This rare literary wave, inspired by a single personality, enriched the tradition of Malayalam poetry and brought about a new literary style and approach, leaving a lasting impression.

The sheer number and variety of poetic biographies dedicated to Gurudevan reflect his extraordinary ability to inspire. These include epic works such as Karunakara Swami's 'Śrīgurubhāgavataṁ', Achyuthan Neeloor's 'Śrīnārāyaṇa Bhāgavataṁ', Velayudhan Cheppally's 'Guru mahabhāgavataṁ', Swami Sudhananda's 'Śrīnārāyaṇa Gurudeva Bhāgavataṁ', C.V. Narayanan's 'Śrīnārāyaṇa Guru Jīvacharitrakāvyam', C. K. Nambiar's 'Śrī Gurusvāmi Charitam', Krishna Vaidyar's 'Śrīnārāyaṇa Charitam', Sachidananda Swami's 'Śrīnārāyaṇa Vijayam', Kappil Keshavan's 'Śrīnārāyaṇa Charitam', Muzhuveli Keshavan's 'Śrīnārāyaṇa Charitam', Kottukoyikal Velayudhan's 'Śrīnārāyaṇa Charitam Gātha', Swami Dharmateertha's 'Śrīnārāyaṇa Māhātyam', V. Chellappan Vadhyar's 'Akṣaya Meghajyotis', and Raman Tholoor's 'Śrīnārāyaṇa Guru Itihāsam'. In addition, shorter poetic tributes like Moorkoth Kumaran's 'Ambalappattu', Kilimanoor N. Keshavan's 'Gurudeva Karnamritham', Kayamkulam P. N. Murali's 'Gurudeva Charitam', Kilimanoor Ramakanthan's 'Gurupatham', M. C. Kunjuraman Vaidyan's 'Śrīnārāyaṇa Gurusvāmi Charitam', P. K. Raghava Panicker's 'Gurudakṣiṇa', Kethakulam Karunakaran's 'Snehadeepam', and M. Radhakrishnan's 'Śrīnārāyaṇaguru Bhāgavataṁ' reflect the devotion and admiration of poets during and after his lifetime. While many of these 'Guru-charitras' have become difficult to find today, their literary and cultural value remains immense. As Vellayani Arjunan notes, this rich body of poetry, shaped by the Guru's life and far-reaching social, spiritual, and cultural reforms, shows how one individual can be the foundation for a vibrant and lasting literary tradition. Sreenarayana Guru continues to serve as a wellspring of creative inspiration.

In poetry, K. P. Karuppan of Cochin state also led reformist efforts in ways similar to Guru. He spearheaded movements for temple entry for the oppressed castes in his region and expressed these reformist ideals in his writing. In poems like 'Udatta Keralam' (Noble Kerala), Karuppan imagines a society where a Namboothiri and a Pulayan sit together to share a meal, an image that directly challenges caste barriers. Critics such as Ulloor acknowledged Karuppan's deep social awareness and saw his literary work as closely linked to the transformative spirit of the time. In fact, it was the drastically changed circumstances of the early twentieth century- brought about in part by Guru's leadership- that allowed Karuppan to be recognised among the major poets of the period. Karuppan himself attended SNDP conferences and expressed his reverence for Guru. On the occasion of Guru's sixtieth birthday, he composed a Sanskrit shloka celebrating Guru's idea of 'Vishwa Dharma' (universal religion), reflecting the philosophical depth of his engagement.

Muloor S. Padmanabha Panicker (1869–1931)

Although slightly older than Guru, continued writing well into the 1920s and became deeply involved in the reformist atmosphere created by Guru's movement. Known earlier for satirical works and popular verse, Muloor's later poetry, such as 'Sādhu Jana Paripālana' (Protection of the Humble), demonstrates a clear shift in thought. He became part of Guru's literary circle and wrote a preface to one of Guru's works, appreciating the clarity of his vision. Muloor also penned verses that criticised caste-based arrogance, aligning himself with Guru's message. Though Kerala Varma gave him the title 'Sarasa Kavī' (Graceful Poet), which could have made him a royal entertainer, Muloor used his poetic gifts to promote unity and reform. His famous line - 'നുണയിലും പൊറുപ്പില്ലെ, ഊണിലും പൊറുപ്പില്ലെ' ('No tolerance in ritual falsehoods, no tolerance in dining divisions') - is often read as a clear echo of Guru's battle against religious pretence and caste discrimination.

In short, writers like Sahodaran Ayyappan, K. P. Karuppan, and Muloor S. Padmanabha Panicker carried forward the torch lit by Sree Narayana Guru. They created poems, essays, songs, and stories rooted in the Guru's ideals, helping those ideas reach far beyond temple walls and monastic retreats. Through their writings, they challenged caste, uplifted the marginalised, and offered visions of a just and equal society. Their literary work gave shape to what Guru had already embodied through his life and actions.

Even the world of drama and early Malayalam cinema felt the pulse of this inspiration. N. Krishna Pillai's play *Sree Narayana Guru* (1955) brought the Guru's journey to the stage, while later films such as *Yugapurushan* (2010) depicted his era and values for a modern audience, showing how Guru's legacy continues to inspire writers and artists alike.

6.4.9 Influence on Progressive Writers and Modern Literature

As Kerala entered the middle of the twentieth century, its literature took on new forms with the rise of the Progressive Writers' Movement, Communist thought, and a growing commitment to social realism. Although these movements were not religious or spiritual, their underlying resistance to caste and class oppression can be traced back to early reformers like Sree Narayana Guru. Many progressive writers drew, even if indirectly, from the

spirit of social awakening that Guru had sparked.

6.4.9.1 Mūrkkottu Kumāran

Mūrkkottu Kumāran was a prominent figure who made a lasting impact on modern Malayalam literature. A prose writer, journalist, and social reformer, his work helped modernise both the language and the cultural life of Kerala. Although his contributions as a poet are smaller by comparison, they are still worth noting.

Born in 1874 into a respected Thiyya family in Mūrkkottu, North Malabar, he faced no barrier to receiving an English education at school and college. Afterward, he devoted himself to cultural reform and took the lead in promoting Sreenarayana Dharma throughout Malabar. A firm believer in Guru's teachings, he held that the social progress of Kerala could be realised only by following the Guru's path. He translated the Guru's Sanskrit work *Darśanamāla* and later wrote a complete biography of him. Sreenarayana is believed to have referred to Kumaran Asan and Mūrkkottu Kumāran as "the two Kumars of the South and the North."

6.4.10 Poetry

Among his shorter poems are 'മർക്കട സന്ദേശം', 'ഇലഞ്ഞിപ്പൂമാല', 'ഒരു മദ്യപൻ', 'പുണ്യാത്മാവ്', 'ഒരു തീയക്കുട്ടിയോട്', 'സരസ്വതിയുടെ മറുപടി', 'മൂന്നു കൈവർത്തകർ', 'അമ്പലപ്പാട്ട് ' and a Malayalam version of Keats's *Isabella* titled 'ആശാകുല'.

Ulloor, writing about the early poem 'മർക്കടസന്ദേശം', commented:

"Though it lacks polish, the author has gathered the qualities needed to become a good poet- but he neither prided himself on being a poet nor spent much time pursuing that path."

Most of his poems focus on everyday life. 'ഇലഞ്ഞിപ്പൂമാല' portrays a young girl from a village who sells garlands to support her family. 'ഒരു മദ്യപൻ' offers a realistic and humorous portrait of a drunkard:

നാണമില്ലാത്തനിൻ നാണം മറയ്ക്കുവാൻ

(To hide the shame of your shamelessness...)

'ഒരു ചിത്രം' attempts to describe in words Raja Ravi Varma's famous painting of Śakuntala looking at Duṣyanta. 'പുണ്യാത്മാവ്' mourns the passing of social reformer Kotiyatthu Rāmuṇṇi Vakkeel and assures that his legacy lives on because of his devotion to the Guru. Drawing inspiration from Kumaran Asan's 'Theyyakkuttiyude Vichāram', the poem 'തീയക്കുട്ടിയോട്' urges a young Theyyam performer to rise.

'മൂന്നു കൈവർത്തകർ' tells of three young fishermen lost at sea and the unbearable grief experienced by their widowed wives. 'അമ്പലപ്പാട്ട്' praises key moments from the Guru's life in a rustic, northern-style ballad, even using older and rare words.

Although Mūrkkottu Kumāran may not be remembered as a great poet, during the literary awakening of Kerala he offered what he could, with quiet sincerity and devotion.

6.4.11 Poetry and Caste

Pallathu Ramaṇ

Pallathu Ramaṇ came of age at a time when Kerala's oppressed castes were beginning to win basic human rights. Born in 1892, he passed away just three years after India achieved independence.

Compared to earlier avarna poets, he experienced less open discrimination, as the marginalised communities had by then gained collective strength and visibility.

Still, Pallathu Ramaṇ did not step back from reformist efforts. As a teacher in a college, he supported cultural transformation chiefly through literature. He contributed across forms including poetry, drama, fiction, and essays.

A large part of Pallathu Ramaṇ's poetry exposes the absurdity of the caste system. As a devoted follower of Sreenarayana Guru, he strongly supported the radical efforts for inter-dining and inter-marriage led by K. Ayyappan. His long poem "Mishrakānti" stands out as a pioneering work, it is considered the first literary text to openly depict inter-marriage. The central character is an Ezhava youth, and the heroine is a girl from the fisher community. With the Guru's blessing, they become an ideal couple.

Many of his poems honour the Guru and carry forward his teachings. These include: സ്വാതന്ത്ര്യഭിക്ഷ (Freedom's Begging Bowl), മധുരസ്വപ്നം (Sweet Dream), മൂന്നു സോദരിമാരുടെ പ്രാർത്ഥന (The Prayer of Three Sisters), പ്രേമലേഖനം (Love Letter), നവയുഗദർശനം (Vision of the New Age), ഭാവിഗർഭത്തിൽ (In the Womb of the Future), and devotional works such as പ്രത്യക്ഷജ്യോതിസ് (The Visible Light), ജഗദ്ഗുരു (World Guru), പരമഹംസദേവൻ (The Supreme Swan-Like Sage), ഗുരു ദേവൻ (Revered Guru), and തമ്പ്രാക്കളേ (O Lords).

Through poems like these, Pallathu Ramaṇ imagined a society free from caste, religion-based division, poverty, and war. His vision was rooted in the life and teachings of Sreenarayana Guru, which he carried forward with deep conviction.

Because he so openly and directly celebrated the life and transformative power of Sree Narayana Guru, Pallathurāman is widely acknowledged as the leading poetic voice of that tradition. Palli Paattu Kunjukrishnan once said that Pallathurāman's poems offer "countless answers to the questions why Sri Narayana was born and for what he lived."

Having lived nearly fifty years after the Guru's mahāsamādhi, Pallathurāman saw every later social reform effort, whether connected to the Russian Revolution, Communism, or Socialism, as a continuation of the Guru's mission. Even when he composed poems like 'അരിവാള് ഗാനം', 'ചുറ്റിക', and 'തൊഴിൽശാലയിലേക്ക്', giving voice to the labouring classes, he remained convinced that the only revolutionary awareness truly suited to Kerala was the one Sreenarayana Guru had awakened.

K. Ayyappan

Ayyappan gave a bold reinterpretation of the Guru's well-known teaching 'ഒരു ജാതി, ഒരു മതം, ഒരു ദൈവം' (one caste, one religion, one God). He rephrased it into a sharper, more radical form: In the poem 'ധർമം' (Dharma), 'ജാതി വേണ്ട, മതം വേണ്ട, ദൈവം വേണ്ട, മനുഷ്യന്' (no caste, no religion, no God for humanity). At first glance, these two slogans may appear contradictory. But on closer examination, it becomes clear that both Ayyappan and the Guru share the same foundation. Sree Narayana Guru openly supported every social reform initiative that Ayyappan led. He even said, "Give me ten workers as sincere as Ayyappan, and reforms will be accomplished in no time."

Ayyappan expresses his philosophy without lessening his respect for the Guru.

The dharma he speaks of is not the sanātana dharma of Brahmanical Hindu tradition. It closely aligns with the Buddhist understanding of dharma, which rejects caste and sectarian divisions. Yet Ayyappan's vision remains fully in harmony with the Guru's own idea of dharma.

Ayyappan never wrote poetry for artistic recognition. In the preface to his collected verses, he clearly states that his poems were written to stir hearts and awaken thought during the activities of the Sahōdara Sangham, the Buddhist mission, and the Rationalist movement. By that goal, they were effective. For a time, Keralites eagerly read his verses and drew inspiration from them in their lives.

With his strong grounding in Western education and sharp sense of satire, Ayyappan exposed the cruelty of caste discrimination and the false dignity of power. During the coronation celebrations in Cochin, he publicly urged the Raja to use public funds for the people's welfare rather than on feasts for Brahmins. In the poem 'റാണി സന്ദേശം' ('Rani Sandesham'), he called on the Travancore Regent to make governance truly representative and responsive to the people.

Valuing reason above all, Ayyappan placed Science where others might place God. His poem 'സയൻസുദശകം' ('*Sayanasudashakam*') is among the earliest hymns to scientific thinking in Malayalam, a modern prayer of the twentieth century:

6.4.12 Satire and Realism

Ayyappan excelled in exposing the cruelty of caste through lively and realistic narrative verse. In 'അലിവിന്റെ ശിക്ഷ' ("*The Punishment for Compassion*"), a Namboothiri woman is punished simply for showing kindness. 'റോസ്' laments a Christian inter-caste love story destroyed by prejudice. 'ഒരു കാഴ്ച' ('A Scene') tells of a once-thriving household reduced to begging.

His mock-epic 'സംഘചരിതം (ഓട്ടൻതുള്ളൽ)' satirises the conservative resistance to inter-dining. Even when people used abusive terms like 'Pulayan Ayyappan', he met them with sharp humour:

After visiting a Pulaya settlement near Chalakudi railway station, Ayyappan wrote a poem that captures the stark contrast between poverty and privilege.

Ayyappan's direct, energetic and rational verses encouraged readers to question inherited beliefs. His writing offered antidotes to superstition and prejudice and became one of the most progressive voices in early twentieth-century Malayalam literature.

P.K.Panicker

Brahmavidyābhūṣaṇ P. K. Panicker (1886–1923), from the village of Puthuppally Varanappally, was the most distinguished poet of his family line. As a young member of a prominent Ezhava household, he grew up at a time when Kerala was undergoing major social and cultural transformation, largely driven by the reform efforts of Sree Narayana Guru.

Born into a family of fighters, Panicker naturally gravitated towards social reform. According to Ulloor, the disdain shown by some towards his community filled him with deep sorrow and unrest. He had supported the Guru from a young age, standing against caste and injustice, and later took part in his brother Ayyappan's more radical activities.

Seeking quicker fulfilment of his

ideals, Panicker joined the Calcutta Brahmo Samaj in 1920. Impressed by his efforts, Hemachandra Sarkar, a leader of the movement, honoured him with the title Brahmavidyābhūṣaṇ. He remained active in reform and literary work until his early death from fever in 1923.

These details are important because the poet and the social reformer in Panicker were inseparable. One might say that his sense of justice shaped his literary voice. He began by following traditional literary forms and gained early success. But once the reformer in him took charge, he abandoned those older paths without hesitation. From then on, he wrote about the burning issues of his time.

In his history of Malayalam literature, Ulloor ranks two of Panicker's scholarly contributions as priceless offerings to the language. The first is his Malayalam translation of Kulasekhara Varma's play *Tapatisamvaranam*, and the second is his detailed explanatory study of *Vṛttarathnākara* by Kedara-bhaṭṭa. Ulloor gives Panicker one of the highest compliments a translator can receive:

Caste oppression was not Panicker's only concern. He also saw economic inequality and poverty as deeply connected to injustice. He preferred to replace the traditional divisions of 'high' and 'low' with new terms such as 'oppressor' and 'oppressed', 'landlord' and 'tenant'.

In the narrative poem 'ഒരു ദയനീയ സംഭവം' (*A Miserable Event*), he calls openly for social resistance. A tenant couple, just ten days after their child's birth, are forced to return to work in the fields. They leave the infant in a temporary shelter made of leaves. When the baby cries out in distress, the landlord forbids them to stop working. By the time they return, this is what they find:

ഒരു കൂട്ടമുറുമ്പു തൂർന്നെടു-ത്തവയാ കൊച്ചുകുരുന്നു.... (*A swarm of ants had bitten and eaten the little baby...*)

The poet condemns the landlord's heartless cruelty with the anger of a labour leader, then turns to comfort the working poor:

> വരികെൻ ചെറുമക്കളേ, നിരാശ്രയരേ!
> (*Come, my little ones, you who are without shelter!*)

By any standard of progressive literature, this poem stands out as one of the most powerful of its time, though Kerala's organised progressive writing would not truly emerge until almost ten years after Panicker's death.

Panicker imagined a world without caste, poverty, war, or disease—a world beyond class divisions. In the short poem 'ഒരു സ്വപ്നം'(A Dream), he dreams of a future in which:

> "smoke will no longer rise from guns
> that make brothers kill brothers …
> widows' tears will no longer moisten
> the soil …
> never again will a father have to watch
> his son die …
> caste, creed and class will never be
> revived in human thought …
> only love will remain, eternal."

Vailoppilli Sreedhara Menon (1911–1985)

A leading poet of the progressive era, Vailoppilli's works such as 'Duravastha' (The Tragic Plight, interestingly sharing a title with Asan's famous poem) and 'Mampazham' (Mango) bring out the suffering of the poor and the injustice of caste. Deeply conscious of Kerala's renaissance legacy, Vailoppilli acknowledged Sree Narayana Guru in his essays as one of the key architects

of Kerala's modern identity. His long poem 'Sree Narayana Guru', published during the 1950s, is a reflective tribute that imagines the Guru's thoughts on contemporary society. Though not widely anthologised, it shows that even in the period marked by socialism, writers looked back to the Guru as a guiding force for equality and justice.

Changampuzha Krishna Pillai (1911–1948)

Famed for romantic and elegiac verse such as 'Ramanan', Changampuzha also wrote poems of social relevance. Though he does not directly mention the Guru, he matured in a society visibly shaped by the Guru's reforms. His sympathetic portrayal of downtrodden characters and his emphasis on universal compassion closely align with the Guru's ideals. In a letter, Changampuzha once wrote that Kumaran Asan, Guru's beloved disciple, was his poetic role model, hinting at an indirect lineage of influence from the Guru to Asan to Changampuzha.

Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai (1912–1999)

The renowned novelist known for works like Thottiyude Makan (Scavenger's Son) and Chemmeen, Thakazhi consistently addressed caste and class divisions. Thottiyude Makan (1947), in particular, tells the story of a Dalit manual scavenger's struggle for dignity. Written two decades after Guru's passing, it carries forward Guru's mission of affirming human worth regardless of birth. Though not religious, Thakazhi frequently credited social reformers such as Sree Narayana Guru and Ayyankali for creating the backdrop against which his stories unfold. In his memoirs, he recalls glimpsing the Guru during a temple festival as a child, an image that remained with him as a symbol of social change. Many of his characters reflect the Guru's teaching that a person should be judged by action rather than birth, a core aspect of Narayana Gurudevan's vision.

Vaikom Muhammad Basheer (1908–1994)

Basheer, a Malayalam novelist and short story writer, was a passionate humanist. He took part in the Indian freedom movement and was shaped by Gandhian ideals, but, growing up in Kerala, he was also influenced, directly or indirectly, by the Guru's teachings. His stories often challenge religious and social boundaries. For instance, in 'Premalekhanam' and 'Ntuppuppakkoranendarnnu', Hindu and Muslim characters form deep, natural friendships. In his essay 'Orupidi Nellikka', Basheer recalls a visit to Sivagiri as a young man. He was struck by the peacefulness of the Guru's resting place and the constructive social work continuing there. His widely quoted line, "All of humanity is one family," beautifully echoes the Guru's universal outlook, rendered in Basheer's warm and simple style.

6.4.13 Poets of the Late Twentieth Century

Poets like O. N. V. Kurup and Sugathakumari have also expressed their admiration for the Guru in essays and occasional poems. O. N. V. Kurup wrote a tribute poem on Guru Jayanti, describing how the Guru "wiped the eyes of the suffering with the soft lotus of wisdom." Sugathakumari, known for her environmental and feminist themes, often mentioned that her father, an SNDP

member, introduced her to the Guru's life and teachings. Her commitment to compassion for all living beings mirrors the Guru's broader interpretation of daya (compassion), which extended beyond caste and even species.

In short, the moral and social principles of Sree Narayana Guru continue to shape Malayalam literature. Whether through disciples like Sahodaran Ayyappan, who wrote fiercely against caste, or through later writers who celebrated the dignity of the marginalised, the thread leads back to the Guru's teachings.

Even those who never met the Guru still followed in his footsteps. They wrote about human equality, the need to uplift the poor and outcast, and the hope of building a just society, ideas that were radical when first voiced by the Guru, but had become widely accepted by the 1950s, in large part because of his lasting influence.

6.4.14 Literary Tributes and References in Later Works

It is also important to observe how later writers paid direct tribute to Sree Narayana Guru in their works:

Many biographies of other reformers make reference to Guru. For example, in a biography of Ayyankali, the Dalit leader, the author Bhagyalekshmi includes a chapter on the friendship between Guru and Ayyankali. This blend of narratives helps spread Guru's life and message further among readers. These cross-references expand the Guru story attain higher planes and stature in Kerala's reformative history.

K.P. Appan in his work "ചരിത്രത്തെ അഗാധമാക്കിയ ഗുരു" (*Guru Who Gave History Its Depth*) also explores Guru's contributions in rewriting Kerala history as the chief architect of Kerala's Renaissance.

The Kerala Sahitya Akademi awards speeches and writings often reflect the views of Narayana Guru. Writers like M. T. Vasudevan Nair have quoted Guru's lines from *Atmopadesa Śatakam* in discourses on the role of of writers in awakening social conscience.

Drama and film script writers also draw inspiration: the film *Yugapurushan* (2010) –was scripted by R. Sukumaran to depict Guru's life alongside other contemporary works. This shows Guru's ideals continuing to inspire storytelling across mediums.

On the 50th anniversary of Guru's samadhi (1978), various magazines invited poets to contribute compositions commemorating theGuru including the echoes of Vailoppilli and Akkitham undertaking a bridge building the Guru's times and modern times.

In the book *Gurudevante Pada mudrakal*, Vasanthakumar Sambasivan discusses Guru's deep influence on Kerala's performing arts, especially Kathaprasangam, a distinctive storytelling form combining music, poetry, and narration.

C. A. Satyadevan, a linguist and musician, arrived at Sivagiri as a follower of Guru. He is widely recognised as the founder of Kathaprasangam. After studying Harikathakalakshepam in Tamil Nadu, he returned to Kerala and began sharing messages of social reform alongside figures like Kumaranasan and Sahodaran Ayyappan.

Satyadevan hoped to present *Harikatha* in Malayalam. He approached

Kumaranasan, who responded by writing 'Markandeya Charitam' for him. After seeing Satyadevan's powerful performance, Kumaranasan, concerned about the illiteracy of his audience, realised that Kathaprasangam was the perfect tool to share his poems such as "Chandalabhikshuki " and "Duravastha." He gave Satyadevan permission to bring them to life in performance.

Although Kumaranasan passed away before this vision was realised, Satyadevan promised to carry it forward. In 1924, he staged the first Kathaprasangam using "Chandalabhikshuki" at a school ground, a public venue accessible to all, unlike the temples of the time. His stirring performance earned heartfelt appreciation, with audience members offering what little they had. Satyadevan, in turn, gave these gifts to those in greater need.

Guru himself recognised the importance of this emerging art form. He told Satyadevan, "You will shine in this art. You should oppose all evil practices and superstitions promoted by priestly Brahmins and others in a refined and civilised language." Later, V. Sambasivan became the leading figure in modern Kathaprasangam. His composition 'Gurudevan', based on the Guru's life, remains a shining example of how this art form - nourished by melody, poetry, and storytelling - became a powerful tool for cultural transformation, deeply shaped by the values of Sree Narayana Gurudevan.

6.4.15 Mentors, Movements, and the Pen's Power: The Enduring Radiance of Sreenarayana Guru

The legacy of Sreenarayana Guru reached far beyond his own time. Many writers and thinkers who never met him were still shaped by the powerful social changes he helped to bring about. The Progressive Writers Movement in Kerala during the 1930s and 1940s did not directly arise from Guru's actions, but its call for justice and the dignity of the marginalised echoed the foundations he had already laid.

Kumaran Asan's influence as an editor also continued through later generations. His work with the journal *Vivekodayam*, guided by Guru, encouraged a new wave of socially aware publications. Writers and editors like Moorkoth Kumaran, who were inspired by Gurudevan, contributed to a growing voice for reform and reason.

Swami Anandatheertha, known also as Dr M. Sahadevan, was one such voice. A disciple-like figure and a committed scholar, he carried Guru's vision forward through essays and speeches later published in book form. His writing blended commentary with narrative examples, much like Guru's own use of parables to explain deep truths.

The earliest biographical sketch of the Guru came in print in 1930 from Thalassery (Tellicherry) written by Moorkothu Kumaran, entitled 'Sree Narayana Guru Swami' (ശ്രീനാരായണഗുരുസ്വാമി).

Kottukoyikkal Velayudhan, who was an ardent follower of Guru, since the age of 12 in 1913 (1088 ME), used to write down and keep even the minutest things in the life of the saint. But his composure of Guru's biography came out only in 1975. Just as Boswell composed Dr.Johnson's biography, Velayudhan's narrative is elaborate including the minutest details from his note-book he maintained, recorded from Guru's life. It was entitled 'Brahmasree, Sree Narayana Guru Swami Jeevitha Charithram' (ബ്രഹ്മശ്രീ ശ്രീനാരായണഗുരുസ്വാമി ജീവിതചരിത്രം) He also

composed 'Sree Narayana Charithram' in Malayalam verses and published it in the same year. (ശ്രീനാരായണചരിതം)

Earlier, Kumaran Asan himself published a biography, 'Sree Narayana Guru Charitham' (ശ്രീനാരായണഗുരുചരിതം) in verses blending factual narration with the Mahakavi's (Poet's) deep poetic insight and personal reverence for the saint and seer. It is this work which inspired Velayudhan to compose the poetic biography of the Guru.

Another significant contribution in this poetic tradition on the theme of untouchability, is Mahakavi Ulloor's work (ദൈവദാസൻ) Daivadasan. This work aligns morally and spiritually with Narayana Guru's teachings.

The earliest but following an unconventional pattern in biographic sketching in English, is the one composed by Nataraja Guru, bearing the title, 'The word of the Guru', published in 1952. It contains the biographical chapters of Narayana Guru, a exposition of his philosophy and teachings and translation and in-depth analysis of Guru's philosophical poems; 'Jati Mimamsa' (A critique of caste), 'Pinda Nandi' (Prenatal Gratitude), 'Jiva Karunya Panchakam' (Kindness to Life), 'Kundalini Pattu' (Song of the Kundalini Snake), 'Chit jada Chinthanam' (Thought and Inertia), 'Anukampa Dasakam' (Scriptures of Mercy) and 'Brahma Vidya Panchakam' (The Science of the Absolute)

Ever since these publications, a number of scholars and disciples have been drawn into this creative area and materialized more and more compliations on Narayana Guru's biography. Their catalognes are accessible on digital platforms. Among these P.K.Balakrishnan's and M K Sanu's works are good to begin with.

6.4.16 Biographical Literature and Beyond

In later decades, many authors wrote biographical and semi-biographical accounts of Guru. Writers like P. K. Balakrishnan and M. K. Sanu approached Guru's life with literary style as well as historical care. Their work shows how Guru's life itself became a subject for creative reflection. These are not only biographies but also works of thoughtful non-fiction shaped by literary tools.

Attempts to explore the un-explored facets of the Guru and the impacts they brought in the society, culture and literature require preservation of valuable materials for future researchers. Many of these materials are not easily accessible or in the verge of destruction due to passage of time. These materials include; Guru's writings, the writings of the authors who came under Guru's direct or indirect influence, critical writings, biographies, valuable diary enteries, other significant documents including rare books, related publications like Ezhava Charithram, social political and cultural histories, History of Language, Ancient Magazines lioke Yukthivadi, Mithavadi, Vivekodayam etc., valuable materials in private collections of devotees and admirers, books preserved in various local libraries in Kerala, Visitors' diaries and manuscripts preserved.

One century is about to complete after the Guru's Samadhi, and it is very late to start initiatives for their preservation. Attempts to archieve them through massive digitalisation has been initiated by IIT Bombay, under the project, 'Narayana Guru digital Research Platform' aiming at extensive collection of materials to be made accessible to the public and researchers. A few other agencies like GURU -DIGILIB Banglore and the

like are also involved in the process of achieving them digitally. Details of such archives / digital libraries can be had from search engine like Google, if queried on the topics:

- Narayanaguru digital library
- GURU-DIGILIB
- Narayana Guru Digital Research Platform

These writings influenced by Guru may be viewed in three general ways:

- Writings of Direct Tribute: These include poems, songs, and biographies focused on Guru's life and teachings
- Social Critiques in Literature: Stories and essays that, even if indirectly, reflect Guru's ideals of equality, justice, and reform
- Explorations of Philosophy: Writings that take up Guru's ethical and spiritual teachings. For instance, M. A. Siddique has written about the humanist side of Guru's non-dualism and how it continues to shape literary thinking.

As Siddique observes, different writers are drawn to different aspects of Guru's vision. One may focus on his struggle against caste, another on his encouragement of education, and another still on his emphasis on spiritual unity. But at the heart of each of these paths lies the same spirit: a call to compassion, justice, and renewal.

His approach to language also shaped modern writing in Kerala. Guru used plain, thoughtful language and familiar local expressions to explain complex truths. This became a kind of education in itself, empowering people to think clearly and speak freely. Writers who came after him often moved away from the old formal style based on Sanskrit and embraced simpler, more accessible language, just as he had done.

6.4.17 Sreenarayana Guru's Enduring Legacy in Biographical Literature and the Arts

The study of Sreenarayana Guru's wide-ranging intellectual and spiritual contributions has found strong expression in the field of biographical literature. This forms an essential part of the broader body of knowledge known as *Sreenarayana Vijnaneeyam*. Over time, people from diverse backgrounds have recorded Gurudevan's life and ideas across many literary forms - poetry, novels, short stories, plays, and even films. The sheer number of these creative portrayals, each offering its own perspective, makes compiling them all a demanding yet important task. For example, Shri Lalsalam has devoted himself to collecting and preserving over two thousand pieces of writing related to Gurudevan, ensuring that the public can access and reflect on his continuing relevance.

Despite this extensive literary production, the organisation and classification of Gurudevan's biographical narratives remain mostly unstructured. This is unlike the well-established systems seen in other traditions, such as the life of Jesus Christ, whose story is presented in a unified way through the Bible. That biographical model offers a consistent understanding of Christ's teachings, such as "You are the salt of the earth," a phrase that expresses a universal ethical message. In a similar way, Gurudevan's teachings speak to many aspects of human experience, though they have been described in different ways by different people. This richness and variety present

both a difficulty and an opportunity for anyone trying to capture the many sides of his life and message.

M. A. Siddique, in his work *Palakayum Chunnambum*, offers valuable reflections on Sreenarayana Guru's life and legacy. He shows how Gurudevan continues to inspire writers across generations. Siddique argues that traditional methods of biography are not enough. Instead, he calls for what he describes as a long-sighted approach, one that explores both the inner and outer aspects of Guru's life and considers new ways of seeing. The range of impact Gurudevan had, which shows itself in many small stories and works of literature, calls for this deeper kind of study. For example, Lalithambika Antherjanam once recalled a childhood meeting with the Guru. When she failed to catch a bird, he gently said, "If you fly like a bird, then you can catch it." Moments like these offer windows into Gurudevan's gentle insight and his way of teaching through everyday events.

According to Siddique, the reasons people write about Gurudevan are wide-ranging. Some knew him personally, some rely on what others have passed down, while others are motivated by admiration, critical interest, or the needs of particular organisations. This variety of motivations suggests that we need a fresh method of writing about Gurudevan's life, one that goes beyond fixed or formal history. Siddique proposes a way of understanding the Guru that reflects his individuality. This leads to the idea that what is needed is not a single narrative, but a full and layered biography told across several volumes, one that can truly capture both the visible and the hidden sides of Gurudevan's life.

Even if the links between these writers and Gurudevan are not always direct, the values running through their work-- the push for equality, the fight against injustice, the focus on knowledge, and the dream of a caste-free society - resound with his teachings. Through the language of theatre, they carry forward his message. They keep alive the possibility of peace, fairness, and shared belonging that Gurudevan believed was possible for everyone.

Sree Narayana Guru's Indirect Influence on India's Literary Landscape

The indirect influence of Sree Narayana Guru in shaping a progressive literary landscape across India, challenging traditional Brahmanical hegemony and its subjugation of the underprivileged, warrants close factual analysis. The historic meeting between Mahatma Gandhi and Narayana Guru at Sivagiri Mutt on March 12, 1925 (whose centenary is currently being celebrated), can be seen as a pivotal moment in creating this literary fabric. This encounter fostered an awareness that consolidated the organizational strength of the marginalized, enabling them to resist and abolish caste discrimination, ultimately aiming for Dalit/Subaltern liberation within India's caste-controlled social structure.

Mulk Raj Anand and the Rise of Progressive Fiction

Anand, then pursuing his doctoral dissertation abroad, visited Gandhi's Ashram in 1929. By this time, he had drafted 'Untouchable', delineating the subaltern hero Bakha, inspired by Gandhi's realistic description of Uka. Gandhi edited Anand's 250-page draft down to 150 pages, advising him to abandon Joyce's artificial style, deeming it unsuitable for an uneducated Dalit latrine cleaner. Anand

revised the novel in realistic expressions, reflecting Gandhian sincerity. His time at the Ashram and commitment to realism marked his transition from elitist Bloomsbury intellectual circles to the progressive writers' movement abroad. 'Untouchable', published in 1935, was translated into over 40 languages globally, pioneering a new fictional style in Indian Writing in English that influenced the emergence of progressive genres in vernacular literatures.

Guru's Insight and Gandhi's Transformation

Before this dialogue, Gandhi was not fully convinced of caste discrimination as a primary social evil. This is evident from his initial analogy, comparing caste differences to the natural variations in mango tree leaves. Guru's profound reply—that the "sap of those leaves taste alike irrespective of their colour, shape and size"—provoked Gandhi's crucial insight. Sahodaran Ayyappan, who accompanied Gandhi on his return journey, observed Gandhi's deep introspection. It was at the public meeting in Cherai that Gandhi, for the first time, declared thrice that "caste shall be annihilated" as a social evil. This transformative insight, rooted in Guru's soft-spoken but provocative words, shattered Gandhi's deeply ingrained convictions as a member of a privileged Hindu community. This realization later led Gandhi to adopt a Harijan boy named Uka into his Ashram, mirroring Narayana Guru's practice of adopting Dalit boys as disciples to dismantle caste. Dr. M. Devakumar notes that in 1926, Gandhi described Uka in 'Young India', inspiring Mulk Raj Anand, who equated the struggle against untouchability with the struggle for freedom.

When Anand published 'Coolie' in 1936, featuring Munoo, a hill boy exposed to humiliating social experiences, it was met with widespread compassion. This subaltern hero's plight inspired P. Kesavadev in Malayalam to compose his masterpiece novel 'Odayil Ninnu' (From the Gutters). This work achieved artistic success and popularity in Malayalam, reflecting a leftist fervor and radical spirit of progressivism in fiction. It significantly contributed to the emergence of Progressive Literature in Kerala, alongside works by writers like P. Bhaskaran, Vayalar, and O.N.V., paving the way for Marxian Aesthetics in Malayalam literary criticism.

Continuing Relevance and Legacy

Despite the initial progress in Kerala through education and organizational strength, Anand observed, 40 years after Indian Independence, that untouchability persisted across India. In 1961, he revisited the theme in 'The Road', introducing Bhikku, a Chamar youth, to combat this social evil. However, Bhikku too ultimately resorted to escapism from powerful Brahmanical structures.

In essence, the progressive fabric of realistic fiction, popularized through Indian Writing in English, transcended linguistic boundaries, inspiring vernacular writers nationwide. This impact was a direct consequence of Narayana Guru's indirect influence through Mahatma Gandhi, whose perceptions on caste discrimination were profoundly reshaped by Guru. Thus, Guru not only prepared Kerala for the spread of communist ideology, as E.M.S. Namboodiripad remarked, but also resonated his reformative ideals through Gandhi into the vastness of Indian Writing in English and the global literary sphere. He prepared the nation for cross-linguistic, cross-cultural growth through progressive writing, fostering regional and, in turn,

national renaissance, and inviting critical appreciation through Marxian Aesthetics. The continued reading, rereading, and reinterpretation of these literatures by modern writers and critics underscore the everlasting glory of Narayana Guru's classics and their contemporary relevance.

Recap

- Sree Narayana Guru preached "One Caste, One Religion, One God for all."
- His core values were equality, education, rationalism, and compassion.
- Guru's influence extended beyond his time into the works of later writers.
- Kumaranasan, a disciple, produced hymns and poems praising Guru's virtues.
- Kumaranasan's 'Gurusatavam' was composed for Guru's 60th birthday.
- Guru guided Asan towards socially relevant poetry, discouraging romanticism.
- Sahodaran Ayyappan radicalized Guru's ideas into atheistic humanism.
- Ayyappan's slogan: "No caste, no religion, no God for mankind."
- He organized misra-bhojanam, supported by Guru, promoting inter-dining.
- Writers like Pandit Karuppan and Muloor spread Guru's message through poetry.
- Guru's 60th birthday in 1916 was celebrated across India and abroad.
- The SNDP Yogam became a vehicle for Guru's reform movements.
- Thiyya writers from North Malabar were empowered by Guru's ideals.
- Guru encouraged education even among lower castes and women.
- Guru's inclusive approach influenced religious and social narratives.
- Later progressive writers indirectly drew from Guru's reformism.
- Guru's legacy shaped Malayalam biographical literature and social novels.
- Writers like Thakazhi, Basheer, and Vailoppilli echoed Guru's vision in their characters and themes.
- The language style of many writers became more accessible under his influence.
- Guru's teachings inspired Kathaprasangam, a popular performance art.

- Guru influenced Telugu and Tamil writers with similar reformist goals.
- Guru's followers included householder disciples, not just monastics.
- Literature became a tool for resistance against caste and social oppression.
- Guru inspired a people-oriented, poetic style rooted in lived experiences.
- His impact is visible in modern educational, literary, and environmental narratives.
- Guru is remembered as a visionary mentor and literary muse for generations.

Objective Questions

1. Who wrote *Gurusatavam*?
2. What principle did Ayyappan derive from Guru's teachings?
3. Which year marked Guru's 60th birthday celebration?
4. Name a journal founded by Ayyappan.
5. What is the title of the novel by Thakazhi influenced by Guru's ethos?
6. Which community's writers in North Malabar were influenced by Guru?
7. Who translated Guru's Darśanamāla into Malayalam?
8. Which poet described Guru as an avatar?
9. What literary movement emerged in Kerala in the 1930s?
10. What is the name of the art form Satyadevan developed to spread Guru's ideas?

Answers

1. Kumaranasan
2. Atheism
3. 1916
4. Sahodaran
5. Thottiyude Makan
6. Thiyya
7. Moorkoth Kumaran
8. Panicker
9. Progressive
10. Kathaprasangam

Assignments

1. Discuss the literary contributions of Kumaranasan as a disciple of Sree Narayana Guru. How did his poetry reflect Guru's spiritual and social ideals?
2. Evaluate the socio-literary impact of Sahodaran Ayyappan's reinterpretation of Guru's teachings. How did his works expand the boundaries of reformist literature?
3. Trace the influence of Sree Narayana Guru on the Progressive Writers' Movement in Kerala. How do themes of caste and class align with Guru's principles?
4. Analyze the literary contributions of Thiyya writers from North Malabar in the context of Guru's legacy. How did political changes and Guru's reformism shape their emergence?
5. Examine how biographical and devotional literature contributed to sustaining Guru's influence over time. Use examples of works by M.K. Sanu and P.K. Balakrishnan.
6. How did Guru's teachings shape modern Malayalam literary forms like poetry, drama, and Kathaprasangam? Discuss with reference to specific examples.

This self-learning material for B21PH01DE Language and Literature of Sreenarayanaguru has been prepared by the Material Development and Distribution Centre. The content is structured into six blocks, with each block comprising four units. To prevent redundancy, all references have been consolidated into a single, comprehensive list. We diligently ensured the accuracy of explanations by consulting various scholars for validation. Valuable feedback from our reviewer significantly refined the material, making it highly learner-friendly. All content has undergone thorough scrutiny by our faculty members.

The material is grounded in extensive research, drawing from a wide array of books, articles, and websites that provide in-depth insights into Sreenarayana Guru's profound philosophy and extensive works. These resources were meticulously studied to accurately present Guru's thoughts, vision, and literary contributions.

Sreenarayana Guru's language and literature are revered for their sacred, divine, and intellectually profound nature. We express our sincere gratitude to the various scholarly and literary works from which we have diligently compiled relevant insights, observations, and explanations.

SGOU

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MODEL QUESTION PAPER SETS

SGOU

SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

QP CODE: ……

Reg. No : …….....
Name : ……...

FOURTH SEMESTER – BA PHILOSOPHY EXAMINATION
DISCIPLINE ELECTIVE COURSE – B21PH01DE
LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE OF SREENARAYANAGURU – SET I
(CBCS - UG)
2023–24 Admission Onwards

Time: 3 Hours Max Marks: 70

Section A

Answer any ten of the following questions in one word or sentence. (10×1 = 10)

1. Who composed *Daiva Dasakam*?
2. What is the main theme of *Ahimsa*?
3. What does *Advaita* mean?
4. What poetic metre is used in *Ātmopadeśa Śatakam*?
5. Which poetic metaphor did Guru use to represent the five senses?
6. What is the title of Guru's ten-verse universal prayer?
7. Who was Thycad Ayyavu Swamikal in relation to Guru?
8. Name one poet influenced by Sree Narayana Guru's teachings.
9. What does *Guru Stavam* mean?
10. What is a *simile* in poetry?
11. What is the literal meaning of *Atmopadeśa Śatakam*?
12. Which poetic image represents divine guidance in Guru's work?
13. What does *Darśanamāla* reflect upon?
14. Which poetic work by Guru contains 100 verses of self-instruction?
15. What type of poem combines devotion with instruction?

Section B

Answer any ten of the following questions in two or three sentences. (10×2 = 20)

16. Describe two characteristics of *Ātmopadeśa Śatakam*.
17. What is Guru's purpose in using poetic language?
18. What role does metaphor play in Guru's poetry?
19. What is *Gadhya Krithikal*?

20. Name two major followers or literary disciples of Guru.
21. Mention any two poetic devices commonly used by Guru.
22. Explain how Guru combines devotion and philosophy in *Swanubhava Giti*.
23. What is the significance of deities in *Darśanamāla* and *Ātmopadeśa Śatakam*?
24. What are the five types of Guru's poetic works as per Dr. T. Bhaskaran?
25. How does Guru incorporate modern imagery into his poetry?
26. What is the significance of Guru's prose writings?
27. Why is *Daiva Dasakam* considered a universal prayer?
28. What is meant by "Vedantic poetic vision" in Guru's literary style?
29. How does Guru's poetry promote ethical and spiritual upliftment?
30. What does "language as chariot of truth" mean in Guru's style?

Section C

Answer any five of the following questions in one paragraph. (5×4 = 20)

31. Write a note on Guru's contribution to Malayalam devotional poetry.
32. How does Guru apply Advaita philosophy using poetic techniques?
33. What is the symbolism of the ocean in Guru's poems like *Śivaprasāda Pañcakam*?
34. Explain how Guru's use of metaphor and simile enhances understanding.
35. What are the key themes in *Darśanamāla* related to the nature of Self and reality?
36. How does Guru connect mysticism with the worship of deities in his hymns?
37. Briefly describe Guru's views on the ethical responsibility of poets.
38. What was the influence of Kumaran Asan and Vivekananda on Guru's literary mission?
39. What makes Guru's style simple yet spiritually profound?
40. What is the impact of Guru's use of prose alongside poetry?

Section D

Answer any two of the following questions in 300 words. (2×10 = 20)

41. Critically examine the poetic features and spiritual ideas in *Ātmopadeśa Śatakam*.
42. Discuss the stylistic and thematic qualities of Guru's metaphysical and devotional hymns.
43. How does Guru's poetry reflect humanism, compassion, and spiritual democracy?
44. Explain Guru's poetic strategy in promoting social and ethical reform through literary expression.

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FOURTH SEMESTER – BA PHILOSOPHY EXAMINATION
DISCIPLINE ELECTIVE COURSE – B21PH01DE
LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE OF SREENARAYANAGURU – SET II
(CBCS - UG)
2023–24 Admission Onwards

Time: 3 Hours Max Marks: 70

Section A

Answer any ten of the following questions in one word or sentence. (10×1 = 10)

1. What does the title *Ātmopadeśa Śatakam* mean?
2. What does the image of the ocean usually represent in Guru's poems?
3. Name one poetic technique used in Guru's mystical verses.
4. What is *Guru Stavam*?
5. Which work of Guru contains verses of philosophical self-instruction?
6. What is the role of metaphor in Guru's poetry?
7. Name a poetic symbol used by Guru to represent the mind and senses.
8. What is the purpose of *Darśanamāla*?
9. Which spiritual reformer is acknowledged as Guru's predecessor and influences?
10. Which poetic tradition is seen in Guru's Tamil devotional compositions?
11. Name a follower of Guru who contributed to Malayalam poetry.
12. Which Sanskrit text was translated into Malayalam by Guru?
13. What do the five senses represent in the metaphor of the lamp?
14. Which of Guru's hymns expresses surrender and divine guidance across life's voyage?
15. What aspect of Guru's poems makes them suitable for mass recitation?

Section B

Answer any ten of the following questions in two or three sentences. (10×2 = 20)

16. Explain the use of simile in Guru's poetry with an example.
17. What makes *Ātmopadeśa Śatakam* unique in terms of metre and theme?
18. How does Guru's poetry reflect his role as both seer and teacher?
19. Write two lines about the mystical vision in *Śivaprasāda Pañcakam*.

20. Who was Thycad Ayyavu Swamikal and what was his relevance to Guru?
21. What is the poetic significance of Guru's *Darśanamāla* in spiritual instruction?
22. Describe the use of deity worship in *Swanubhava Giti* or *Ardhanareeshwara Stavam*.
23. What is humanism in the context of Guru's teachings?
24. Mention two poetic elements that make Guru's writings accessible to all.
25. How does Guru combine Vedic and Tamil devotional traditions in his works?
26. Describe the influence of Guru's literary vision on later poets.
27. What is the meaning of "poetry as chariot of truth" in Guru's style?
28. State any two features of Guru's prose compositions.
29. What role did musical rhythm play in Guru's hymns?
30. What does Guru aim to teach through metaphors like the steamship and railway?

Section C

Answer any five of the following questions in one paragraph. (5×4 = 20)

31. Explain the role of poetic devices in enhancing Guru's spiritual message.
32. How is *Darśanamāla* structured to convey philosophical truths?
33. Write a paragraph on how Guru blends tradition and innovation in his poetic language.
34. How does *Daiva Dasakam* represent universal devotion?
35. In what ways does Guru's poetry reflect his humanistic and reformist ideals?
36. Compare Guru's poetic use of deity worship with the Tamil Saiva tradition.
37. What is the literary and spiritual contribution of Kumaran Asan under Guru's influence?
38. Describe the symbolic connection between the individual soul and the Absolute in Guru's imagery.
39. What makes Guru's style unique in Malayalam literary tradition?
40. Explain Guru's vision of simplicity in poetic expression and spiritual depth.

Section D

Answer any two of the following questions in 300 words. (2×10 = 20)

41. Critically analyse the literary and philosophical importance of *Darśanamāla*.
42. How does Guru's use of simile, metaphor, and symbol contribute to the clarity of his teachings?
43. Discuss the influence of spiritual humanism in Guru's poems and its relevance today.
44. Examine the stylistic and devotional elements in Guru's hymns like *Shiva Shatakam* and *Swanubhava Giti*.

സർവ്വകലാശാലാഗീതം

വിദ്യയാൽ സ്വതന്ത്രരാകണം
വിശ്വപൗരരായി മാറണം
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കൂരിരുട്ടിൽ നിന്നു ഞങ്ങളെ
സൂര്യവീഥിയിൽ തെളിക്കണം
സ്നേഹദീപ്തിയായ് വിളങ്ങണം
നീതിവൈജയന്തി പാറണം

ശാസ്ത്രവ്യാപ്തിയെന്നുമേകണം
ജാതിഭേദമാകെ മാറണം
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ജ്ഞാനകേന്ദ്രമേ ജ്വലിക്കണേ

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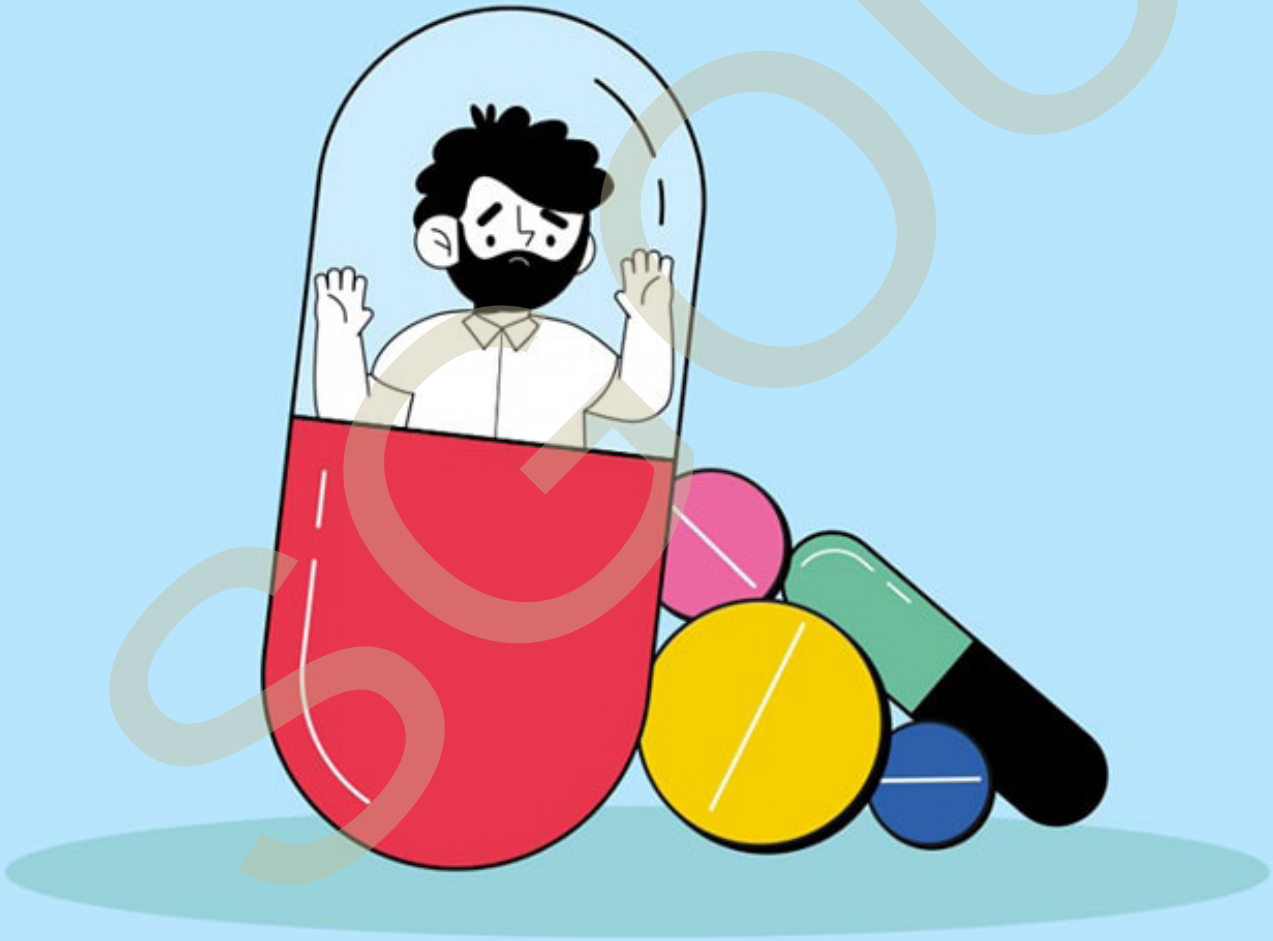

SCERT

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LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE OF SREENARAYANAGURU

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