

# A HANDBOOK ON KERALA

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS  
GOVERNMENT OF KERALA

## SOCIO-RELIGIOUS REFORM MOVEMENTS

One important outcome of this ferment was the awakening of the masses, the lower orders in the Hindu society, against social injustice and evils. This awakening found articulation in Kerala towards the last quarter of the 19th century. A number of socio-religious reform movements which were also the earliest democratic mass movements in Kerala, took shape. On the whole, these movements were peaceful and non-violent in action, though there was an undercurrent of militancy also in them. These movements were of the utmost significance because Kerala had for centuries tolerated the caste system in its most oppressive form. The rigid caste system and irrational caste taboos existed in such a heinous way that the lower orders were not only 'untouchable' but "unapproachable" as well. In Malabar, despite the advent of direct British rule and the resultant separation of the caste system from the administrative machinery, social status and economic competence of the individual was still determined by his position in the caste hierarchy. In the princely states of Cochin and Travancore, the hold of the caste system was even more suffocating. Until the 20th century, Governmental positions were denied to lower castes and non-Hindus.

One of the most important social reform movements was spearheaded by Shri Narayana Guru, the great Ezhava saint and social reformer. He fearlessly criticized and campaigned against the rigours of the caste system, the Brahmin hegemony, and the numerous social disabilities of the Ezhavas and other lower castes. Soon Shri Narayana Guru became the rallying point for the Ezhavas and Thiyyas

to unite and organise. The Sri Narayana Dharma Parimalana Yogam, (SNDP) literally the society for the propagation of this moral teaching of Shri Narayana, came into being. Within a short period the Guru and the Yogam drew towards them a brilliant band of dedicated workers, including the poet Kumaran Asan, whose efforts constitute an eloquent testimony to what a community, subjected to centuries of tyranny, can do and achieve through unity, self-help and organisation.

Shri Narayana was, however, no sectarian philosopher and leader. His philosophy was the *advaita*, as enshrined in the Upanishads, which he summed up in the celebrated motto: "One Caste, One Religion and One God for All". A programme of action founded upon such sublime humanism and social purpose won, not destined to remain confined to one caste only; it soon became the philosophy of Hindu reformation, encompassing all castes, including the Brahmin.

The Nayers also felt the need for reform. Throughout the medieval period and until well into the 19th century, the Nayers had a pre-eminent role in Kerala. By the middle of the 19th century, however, this dominance started waning. Decline set in. Institutions like the *tharavadam* (non-legal marriage) and the matrilineal joint family system which had ensured the strength of the Nayar community earlier, now became productive of many evils: the system of non-legal marriage produced immorality and crime, while the joint family set-up stifled individual initiative and enterprise. The impact of the market economy, the disappearance of traditional military training, the absorption of new values through the new system of education, the self-consciousness being generated among the lower castes and their cry for equality and privileges—all these factors brought about a decline of Nayar dominance. The sense of decline gave an impetus to the spirit of reform that

expressed itself in the work of religious man like Chattampi Swamikal, in literature, on the press and platform and later in legislative enactments in respect of marriage, inheritance, property rights etc. Ultimately, the movement crystallised in the foundation, in 1914, of the Nair Service Society.

The impulse to change was not confined to the Ezhavas and other untouchables and the Nayers. As a matter of fact, in varying degrees, it characterised every caste in Hindu society as well as the Christians and the Muslims.