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Narayana Guru's ashram stabilizes after violent power transfer

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The Kerala police anticipated resistence when they made their move to enforce a court-ordered transfer of administration at the Sree Narayana Guru ashram at Sivagiri in September, 1995. So they came in plain clothes, surrounded the main buildings and took the supporters of Swami Saswatheekananda by surprise at the six-acre ashram. But a handful of renegade monks backed, incredibly enough, by 500 members of the radical Muslim People's Democratic Party, refused to relinquish the Sharada Madam, the ashram's main temple, and pelted officers with stones. The police in turn charged with upraised canes. When it was over an hour later, 66 police and 75 demonstrators, including some monks, were injured, and windows of the temple broken.

Devotees of Sree Narayana Guru, virtual patron saint of Kerala, were shocked. The great swami had worked from 1870 to his mahasamadhi in 1928 to uplift the low-caste Ezhavas, 50% of Kerala's people. The 52 monks of his ashram controlled dozens of temples, schools, monasteries and a hospital. It was an outrage and contrary to expectations that some monastic descendants, in whom he entrusted the movement, would, in 1995, do pitched battle with police.

"A monk who held the reins of power for two terms and became heavily involved in politics and malpractice is responsible for the predicament," stated Swami Prakashananda, the newly and duly-elected president of the governing trust. The monk in question is Swami Saswatheekananda. During his ten-year term as pontiff, he was accused of autocratic rule, misappropriation of funds (leaving many of the trust's institutions bankrupt) and unseemly involvement in local politics, especially through exploitation of caste prejudice, the very curse Narayana Guru fought against. Swami Prakashananda told Hinduism Today that fear of exposure forced Saswatheekananda to oppose a proper transfer of power when his term ended.

Complaints of mismanagement led to numerous court cases in efforts to wrest control of the extensive spiritual institution from Saswatheekananda. On repeated orders from the court, Swami Prakashananda climbed the flight of steps of Sivagiri thirteen times to take over the reigns of the Sree Narayana Dharma Sangham Trust. All these efforts were thwarted by Saswatheekananda. His followers claimed the court orders did not apply to them. They even enlisted the PDP (the Muslim People's Democratic Party) on their side, whose chairman, Abdul Nazar Madani, said, "There should not be another Ayodhya in Kerala, so the PDP intervened in the Sivagiri issue." The PDP was banned by the Kerala government after the incident.

Swami Saswatheekananda denies wrongdoing and complains, "Even the British police refrained from attacking such protesters during the independence struggles." He says the board cannot assemble, as such a meeting must be called by

the out-going president, who is--himself. "They have come to power violating the bylaws and rules," he argues.

The community is generally relieved. The trust's oversight State Body is firmly in support of the new administration. An Ezhave elder said, "The change of power is appreciated by the people." Prof. M.K. Sanu, a follower of Narayana Guru, told Hinduism Today, "Had the police not intervened in time, Sivagiri would have become a land of sin. It is the blessing of the Lord that they came in."

The great reformer: During his lifetime, Sree Narayana Guru was responsible for the social and religious transformation of the Ezhava community, who today constitute 50% of Kerala's 20 million Hindus. In his day, the "untouchable" Ezhava caste was barred entry to the temples, and could not approach the outer walls closer than fourteen feet. Narayana Guru plotted a strategic response. He chose not to agitate for temple entry, given the area's abysmal caste relations (Swami Vivekananda had characterized Kerala as a "lunatic asylum"). Rather, he quietly installed a Sivalinga at Arupuran and then at other places around the state. The brahmin elite challenged his right to encroach upon their prerogative. He merely responded, "What is the concern? I have only installed an Ezhava Siva." He also saw to the training of an Ezhava priesthood for the temples by establishing a Brahma Vidyalayam at Sivagiri. He eventually founded more than a hundred Ezhava temples with non-brahmin priests--bypassing upper-caste social controls.

Nararyana Guru frequently proclaimed, "One caste, one religion and one God for man." Asked to explain what he

meant by one religion, he replied, "If this war of religions should end, with self control all have to learn about all religions. Then it will become clear that, as far as basic tenets are concerned, there are no substantial differences. The religion which thus evolves is the 'one religion' that we advocate." He did not believe in conversion and countered the extensive Christian and Muslim influence in the area by direct action and preaching.

Philosophically, Narayana Guru was an advaitan, but he denied the illusory nature of the world as taught by Adi Shankara. He emphasized the presence of God everywhere: "What's known as this man or that, when probed, is in this world, a Primal Self Form." He was a devotee of Siva (as are most of Kerala's Hindus), influenced by Saiva Siddhanta, but did not propound that philosophy's intricacies.

Later in life he stopped the construction of new temples and focused on social action, coining aphorisms such as, "Educate to be free; organize to be strong; thrive through industry." He implemented these ideals through establishing centers of education in each of his temples. He reformed the marriage rituals to make them simpler and less costly, dictating, for example, a maximum of ten guests. In a famous incident, Narayana Guru arrived at a follower's home just in time to summarily terminate an overly elaborate family celebration. Through his efforts, the Ezhavas are today a respected community.

Swami Dharmatheerth, a direct disciple, summed up, "Narayana Guru created a revolution before anybody knew its

exact nature or consequences, without antagonizing anyone or demolishing any doctrine or attacking any sect or creed. No other teacher ever accomplished his mission so peacefully."

Swami Saswatheekananda has virtually exhausted his legal options, and Swami Prakashananda anticipates no serious threat to his new administration. Already several of the monks who supported Saswatheekananda have rejoined the governing board. So, perhaps once again the mission of this great saint will proceed peacefully.

"The goal of all religions is the same. Once rivers reach the ocean, is there difference like shallow and deep? Religion has the role of creating in humans the trend to ascend."
--Sree Narayana Guru