

NAVIGATING CASTE IN COLONIAL KERALA:

Aquatic ontology and the politics of devotion in Sree Narayana
Guru's *Daiva Dasakam*

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ABSTRACT: This article examines *Daiva Dasakam* (1914), a ten-verse Malayalam prayer by Sree Narayana Guru, as a subaltern aquatic theology emerging from the caste-stricken social geography of colonial Kerala, India. The hymn, originally intended as a collective prayer, is still used today across the Ezhava community, a caste historically subjected to untouchability and socio-spatial exclusion. Reading Guru through the frameworks of aquapelagic studies and political devotion, we argue that the hymn relocates the divine from Brahmanical land-based hierarchies to an egalitarian maritime imaginary. This aquapelagic shift enables Guru to imagine a 'touchable' God and a collective of devotees navigating beyond the reach of caste authority. The analysis demonstrates how Guru's poetic theology refuses Brahmanical legibility and constructs a heterotopic space at sea. It becomes an act of theological self-authorisation that speaks to the politics of lower-caste emancipation. This article places caste and subaltern littoral poetics at the heart of aquapelagic thought, contributing to a Blue Humanities that is expanding geographically and becoming increasingly attentive to the marginalised epistemologies of the Indian Ocean world.

KEYWORDS: Sree Narayana Guru, Aquapelagic thought, Blue Humanities, caste, Kerala.

Introduction

Daiva Dasakam (1914), also known as 'Ten Verses to God', is a prayer hymn in Malayalam composed by Sree Narayana Guru (1856-1928). The work emerges from the late 19th century literary tradition that developed within the oppressed Ezhava community of Kerala, a state in southwestern India along the Malabar Coast (Figure 1).¹ Bordered by the Arabian Sea to the west and the Western Ghats to the east, Kerala's geography is defined by its relationship with water (Figure 2). This article argues that *Daiva Dasakam*, through its maritime imaginary drawn from the lifeworld of an erstwhile untouchable caste, challenges land-

¹ Even though Kerala was formed only in 1956 through the linguistic reorganisation of Travancore, Cochin, and the Malabar district of the Madras Presidency, we use 'Kerala' here as a retrospective shorthand to refer to the sociocultural region that these territories came to constitute.

based caste hierarchies of representation and uses poetry to perform an act of theological self-authorisation and caste emancipation.



Figure 1 – Kerala's position in south-west India (Filpro, 2019).

Narayana Guru was an Ezhava ascetic and influential social reformer who became central to the anti-caste movements of late-19th and early-20th century Kerala. The Ezhavas are a formerly untouchable, non-Dalit, lower-caste community, comprising roughly 23-25% of the state's population.² Their organisational and political consolidation, forged through struggles for equality and dignity, has rendered them a significant social and political force in the region. It is within this community that *Daiva Dasakam* circulates as a living text, recited at events like weddings, funerals, housewarmings, and organisational meetings. Yet *Daiva Dasakam* stands apart from most mainstream Hindu devotional hymns in Malayalam. It names no particular deity, nor does it draw from any pre-existing narratives or myths. Most strikingly for this study, *Daiva Dasakam* is not set in land. Narayana Guru's God is a boatman. The devotee prays to the navigator guiding them in the vast endless ocean. This subaltern aquatic imaginary, emerging from a formerly untouchable caste, thus intervenes in and expands the conceptual terrain of Blue Humanities.

² The Ezhavas were consolidated as a community in the late 19th century, bringing together castes and sub-castes occupying comparable positions within the caste hierarchy. This comprised Billavas from Northern Malabar, Thiyyas from Malabar, Chovvars from Cochin, Ezhavas from Travancore, and their various sub-castes (Sreebitha, 2013).



Figure 2 - Map of the Kerala coast and its backwaters (Nataraja, 2005).

Against the backdrop of this subaltern littoral poetics, the article addresses the following questions. First, how does *Daiva Dasakam* articulate a subaltern aquatic ontology by reworking circulating maritime-religious imaginaries through the lived waterscapes and caste experiences of colonial Kerala? Second, how does Narayana Guru's aquatic/oceanic imagination of God, as an accessible and guiding figure, reconfigure ideas of community, divinity, and identity in ways that challenge caste hierarchy? In addressing these questions, the study places caste and subaltern littoral poetics at the heart of Blue Humanities.

This article proceeds in four sections. First, it situates the Ezhava community and Sree Narayana Guru within the sociopolitical and historical context of caste-afflicted colonial Kerala. It shows how Guru's interventions, through both thought and praxis, reconfigured regional power structures. Second, it theorises the aquapelagic as a critical lens for reading subaltern littoral poetics, bringing Blue Humanities into conversation with caste critique.

The third section examines the works of Guru and the final section undertakes a close reading of *Daiva Dasakam* to examine how Guru's oceanic imagination articulates a subaltern aquatic ontology.

Caste, space, and social reform in colonial Kerala

In pre-independent Kerala, the violence of caste was part of everyday life. *Ayitham*, an extreme form of untouchability, enforced a regime of violence which deemed proximity itself as pollution. Lower castes were forbidden from walking public roads, approaching higher castes, or going near temples. The penalty for even a minor violation was often mutilation, or death. *Ayitham* was the norm, sanctified by religious doctrines and underwritten by the laws of feudal states. Caste violence thus operated not as a social aberration but as a sanctioned system. It territorialised the lower-caste body, their homes, and the landscape itself long before colonial modernity arrived to document and oftentimes bureaucratised its horrors. Quoting H.S. Grame, Sullivan writes,

The rules of Malabar prescribed that a slave of the castes Poolyan, Waloovan and Parian shall remain 72 paces from a brahmin and from a nair, 48 from a teean.... and the other castes generally 48 paces from a brahmin and nair.... (Sullivan, 1916, p. 129)

However, this did not prevent the upper-caste feudal order from formulating an agricultural economy founded on the exploitation of the lower castes. Samuel Mateer, a London Missionary Society member writing in the late 19th century, describes the conditions of the lower-caste Parayas and Pulayas:

Being frequently engaged in digging, manuring and transplanting young rice, repairing the banks, and performing other labours in the rice fields, sometimes standing for hours in water, they are subject to rheumatism, fever, cholera and other diseases. (Mateer, 2011, p. 43)

They were diminished to beasts, labouring in the paddy fields alongside animals. They were bound for life and were denied any right over the land. The lower-caste communities were also barred from using umbrellas, or lighting lamps after dark. Men or women were not allowed to cover their upper bodies. They were denied education of any kind. Even their sounds, their speech, songs, or mourning cries, could be punished as auditory pollution. Such everyday terror was not incidental but structural.

By the mid-19th century, caste brutality catalysed a strong anti-caste movement in the region. Reformers such as Chattampi Swamikal, Ayyankali, Pandit Karuppan and Dr. Padmanabhan Palpu, contested caste through agricultural labour strikes, public mobilisation, attempts at education and gender rights, legal activism, theological critique, and bureaucratic intervention. They were also aided by a growing subaltern print culture. Together, these leaders educated, agitated, and organised towards a broad movement for social reform, forging what would become the bedrock of Kerala's 20th-century social democratisation. As the largest Hindu caste in the region, the Ezhavas occupied a distinctive position within this anti-caste discourse. The Ezhavas were an untouchable, lower caste. However, they were placed higher in the hierarchy when compared to the Dalits or the other outcastes. This intermediate location meant that the Ezhavas faced discrimination from the castes who were considered above them and simultaneously

practised untouchability towards the Dalit castes, who were considered below them. As the August 1916 edition of the newspaper *Mithavadi* notes:

Ezhavas could experience the comfort of the 'higher' and the distress of the 'lower' by being at the middle point of the caste hierarchy. No other communities could get this facility. Hence, their efforts to end the caste structure have an exceptional vigour. (Ramadas, 2022, p. 153)

Despite this intermediary position, the Ezhavas remained constrained by caste violence. Like other lower castes, they were denied education and access to public roads, taxed heavily, and subjected to unpaid labour. Even wealth or education could not secure them employment. Within the community, subcaste hierarchies reproduced the same logic: practising untouchability and prohibiting intermarriage.

A community consolidation spearheaded by Dr. P. Palpu (1863-1950) challenged these conditions through the *Ezhava Memorial*, a mass petition to the King of Travancore demanding political representation, education, and employment for the community. These efforts addressed material and institutional exclusions. However, the limited success of these efforts also showed how caste hegemony was sustained through religious authority. Temples, rituals, holy books, the right to worship, and even access to temple roads were structurally denied to the lower castes. God thus appeared as a mediated and largely inaccessible figure. Unable to enforce structural changes to the caste system, reformist efforts increasingly sought to reimagine, or move away from, the religious frameworks that legitimised caste. These emerging sociopolitical imaginaries redefined God by rejecting upper-caste constructs of hierarchical and exclusionary deities and practices. These engagements also raised questions about the legitimacy of the religion that perpetuated such divisions. In this context of indignation, the Ezhavas explored alternative forms of dignity, including conversion to Semitic religions or Buddhism, anti-caste intellectual traditions in Buddhism, and the pursuit of a *swathanthra samudayam* (an independent community). It is within this pursuit of dignity that Sree Narayana Guru's interventions in religion and worship assume their historical and political significance.

Theology as spatial and social reconfiguration in Sree Narayana Guru

Narayana Guru's response to this crisis of religious exclusion was a radical reconfiguration. Rather than appealing to the caste order for reform, he confronted the structures that legitimised and normalised the caste system. He attacked the Brahmanically mediated ritual first through iconoclastic temple consecrations, then through a poetic corpus that weaponised *Advaita* metaphysics against caste itself. In 1888, Guru consecrated the Siva idol in the Aruvippuram temple, an act that was doctrinally impermissible for an *avarana* ascetic.³ The idol was a stone he had taken from the riverbed. When Brahmins challenged his authority to consecrate based on his 'lower' caste status, he famously replied that the idol that he installed was "not a Brahmin Shiva but an Ezhava Shiva" (Kumaran, 1971, p. 131).

With the Aruvippuram consecration, Narayana Guru challenged the idea of God as perceived in caste Hinduism. Consecration of a stone as an idol of Siva by an untouchable

³ Individuals or groups outside the traditional four-fold Hindu Varna system, often untouchable castes.

was an act of religious disobedience. Beginning with this Ezhava Siva, Guru's temple-making underwent a significant transformation. Between 1921 and 1927, Guru consecrated four unconventional temples that demonstrated how his reformist theology worked. At Karamukku near Thrissur, rather than installing a conventional deity, he consecrated a three-branched oil lamp, symbolising light as an emblem of knowledge and liberation. At Murukkumpuzha, he rejected a traditional idol in favour of a brass plate inscribed with *Om*,⁴ *sathyam* (truth), *dharmam* (righteousness), *daya* (compassion), and *shanti* (peace). In Cherthala in 1927, he consecrated a mirror. He repeated this *Kannadi Prathishta* or mirror consecration later in Thalayazham. The intention behind this unconventional idol was to direct devotees towards recognising the divine within themselves, rather than locating it in any idol. In each of these consecrations, Guru displaced conventional Brahmanical ritual authority and iconography, redirecting attention to the ethical and self-relational dimensions of the divine. As a Guru (teacher/guide), he led the community towards a reconfiguration of belief itself, redefining the Brahmin-dictated theological discourse of the Ezhavas by defining what is, or rather what is not, caste, religion, and God from a lower-caste perspective.

This theological evolution is mirrored in Guru's literary output. A multilingual writer who composed in Malayalam, Tamil, and Sanskrit, he began with hymns praising conventional Hindu gods.⁵ His later work, however, shifted decisively toward deconstructing the very assumptions about divinity and hierarchy. These works included *Atmopadesa Satakam* (One hundred verses on Self Instruction) (1897), *Jiva Karunya Panchakam* (Five verses on Kindness to Life) (1914), *Anukampa Dasakam* (Ten verses on Mercy) (1914), and *Daiva Dasakam*. This shift from religious hymns to verses of self-instruction is rooted in the larger philosophy of Guru and his radical take on Advaita Vedanta.

Classical Advaita, most influentially associated with Adi Shankara, is a non-dual philosophical system which asserts that the individual self (*Atman*) and ultimate reality (*Brahman*) are fundamentally one and the same. The perception of their separation is an illusion (*Maya*) born of ignorance (*Avidya*). However, despite proposing the non-dual oneness at a metaphysical level, Advaita accommodated the empirical reality of caste hierarchies, seeing it as a natural part of the transient, material world. Thus, it retained social structures of caste even while it taught transcendental unity.

Narayana Guru inverted this logic. If Shankara used non-duality to transcend caste metaphysically while leaving it intact socially, Guru, employing the same Advaita, wielded non-duality as a direct, practical weapon to dismantle caste. For Guru, the oneness of *Brahman* was not a reason to accept hierarchical distinctions as a provisional reality, but an imperative to eradicate them as a fundamental illusion that must be corrected in the lived world. This reorientation produced a poetics of ontological equality. Across the corpus, he reiterates that all beings are the manifestation of the same consciousness. Rooted in the same logic, he asserts that a human being cannot be defined by their birth, caste or any ritual. Guru's intellectual framework was also shaped by a long-standing genealogy of anti-caste thought. As Udaya Kumar observes, Guru's understanding of Advaita drew from vernacular, anti-Brahmin, lower-caste Tamil spiritual lineages circulating in southern Travancore (Kumar, 2016, p. 48). This enabled him to rearticulate non-dualism with caste atrocity at its centre. Within this context, figures such as Ayya

⁴ A sonic expression of the divine.

⁵ Guru's early devotional compositions include "Bhadrakali Ashtakam" (1884), "Vinayaka Ashtakam" (1884), "Siva Ashtakam" (1887), and "Subrahmanya Ashtakam" (1887).

Vaikundar, who proclaimed *Jaathi onnu, matham onnu, kulam onnu, daivam onnu, lokam onnu* ('One caste, one religion, one lineage, one god, one world'), and Thaicaud Ayya, who affirmed *Intha ulagathile orae oru jathi than, orae oru matham than, orae oru kadavul than* ('In this world, there is but one caste, one religion, and one god'), advanced egalitarian theologies that linked divine unity with social equality (Sanu, 1980/2013, pp. 81–82).

Narayana Guru's later works, beginning from *Atmopadesa Satakam*, mark a shift from devotional poetry to a didactic and radical one. This body of work is rich in metaphysical aphorisms, social critique, and instructive and ethical appeals. A hallmark of Guru's didactic style is his use of everyday analogies: the rope mistaken for a snake, the pot and its clay, waves and the ocean, a lamp and its light. Through these parallels, he rendered metaphysics tangible and relatable for his community. Guru's verses are often concise aphorisms or maxims, inviting contemplation or reflection. He also uses interrogative rhetoric, frequently posing questions like 'where is the difference then?' to destabilise the familiar beliefs and assumptions of his readers.

Consider one of Narayana Guru's most famous maxims: *Oru jaathi, oru matham, oru daivam manushyanu* ('one caste, one religion, one god for humankind') (N. Guru, 2005/2015, p. 385). Deceptively simple, this unifying declaration appears throughout Kerala on walls, posters, and statues. Here, Guru also exercises a poet's craftsmanship. *Jaathi*, translated as 'caste,' also means 'kind' or 'species' in Malayalam. This becomes clear in the subsequent line where he cements this polysemy: *Oru yoni orakaram, oru bhedavumillithil* (Of one vagina, of one form, difference herein is none) (p. 385). In this move, Guru insists on a biological and ontological unity that transcends caste distinctions. In a different aphorism, Guru states equality as a simple empirical fact. He sidesteps the theological debate altogether and grounds equality in starkly biological terms: *Punarnnu perunnathellam orinamam* (Those who embrace and reproduce are of one kind) (p. 385). He reduces caste difference to a biological absurdity, denying it any metaphysical justification.

The resulting style is a deliberate fusion of registers. There is a sense of spiritual instruction embedded in philosophical precision and devotional warmth. It is precisely due to the instructive, radical nature of Guru's writing that his use of literary devices becomes important. For Guru, the analogies, aphorisms, and metaphors did not serve as literary devices alone. As a pedagogue, he drew on familiar surroundings and narratives to educate his community and the public at large. Writing from Kerala, an Indian Ocean littoral or aquapelago, Guru repeatedly turns to water not merely as a literary ornament, but as a structuring language, making aquatic imagery central to how the community is imagined.

Kerala and Aquapelagic Imaginaries

The coastline of Kerala may at first glance appear as a linear shoreline. However, on a closer inspection, it emerges as a fluid mosaic of interconnected waterscapes with sea, backwaters, rivers, and polders. Running parallel to the coast, an intricate network of backwaters—such as Vembanad, Ashtamudi, and Kayamkulam—along with forty-four perennial rivers, including the Periyar, Pamba, and Bharathapuzha, and seasonally flooded lowlands, binds the region into a single waterscape. Heavy monsoons, lasting at least five months annually, continually replenish this dense network of waterbodies. Even agriculture is dominated by the water-intensive paddy cultivation.

With limited road infrastructure, rugged terrain, and dense forest cover, waterways became the primary arteries of mobility and trade. European powers, first the Dutch, and then the British, developed inland channels to improve transport and agricultural extraction. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, water was not merely a feature of Kerala's geography. It was the determining force of the region's economic, political, and socio-spatial organisation.

Given this prominence of water, we argue that Kerala corresponds to what Philip Hayward describes as an aquapelago: "an assemblage of the marine and land spaces of a group of islands and their adjacent waters" (Hayward, 2012, p. 1). Even though Hayward develops the aquapelago primarily in relation to island formations, his emphasis on lived human engagement with aquatic space allows the concept to be extended to a region like Kerala. He notes, "the emphasis here is on the aquapelago as an entity constituted by human presence in and utilisation of the environment (rather than as an 'objective' geographical entity)" (p. 6). With water structuring social, economic, political, and cultural life, 19th and early 20th century Kerala corresponds closely to Hayward's definition of an aquapelagic society:

a social unit existing in a location in which the aquatic spaces between and around a group of islands are utilised and navigated in a manner that is fundamentally interconnected with and essential to the social group's habitation of land and their senses of identity and belonging. (Hayward, 2012, p. 6)

Thus, water was a familiar trope to colonial Kerala. However, this familiarity carried an added dimension of caste. This differential dimension produced a dual spatial logic: one centred on the inland agrarian regions and another along the coast.

The relationship between land and coast has long been marked by tension in precolonial and colonial Kerala. Caste authority was exercised most forcefully in the inland regions, where agriculture constituted the economic mainstay and bonded and enslaved labour from lower-caste communities sustained agrarian production. By contrast, the coastal regions did not permit the same consolidation of caste power. Even coastal city-states such as Kochi and Kozhikode, despite their dependence on the maritime spice trade, witnessed a more limited and uneven operation of caste hegemony.

Francis Zimmermann locates the roots of this inland-coastal split in a Brahmanical religious geography. In Sanskrit classifications of space, the cultivated inlands or *jangala* became associated with health and civilisational order. The coast, however, was deemed *anupa*: marshy, chaotic and unhealthy (Zimmerman, 1992, p. 18). This spatial hierarchy was reinforced by Brahmanical legal texts such as the *Manusmriti*, which consigned non-Brahmins to these marginal zones and extended ritual taboo to seafaring itself (Bühler, 1886/1964, p. 105). Nagam Aiya, the chronicler of Travancore, notes that aversion to seafaring among Keralites was not indigenous but emerged with the spread of Brahmanism from around the 16th century onward (Aiya, 1906, p. 220). Despite its long coastline and active role in the Indian Ocean trade, Kerala did not develop a prominent seafaring population. Maritime labour was largely undertaken by lower-caste communities and by local Muslims, whose presence along the coast was outside Brahmanical social regulation. The arrival of the Portuguese further deepened this inland-coast divide. From the early 16th century, the Portuguese converted sections of lower-caste communities to Christianity, building churches along the coast. A parallel process had already taken place in the Malabar region. The Indian Ocean trade had facilitated the emergence of a Muslim population on

the coast from as early as the 7th century. The coast thus developed as a distinct zone, integrated into global maritime circuits, and yet partially insulated from inland caste authority.

In the inland regions, water operated also as a means of caste discipline. Upper-caste communities controlled the land. Meanwhile, the agricultural labour formed from lower-caste communities were compelled to toil in paddy fields submerged in deep water for months. In regions such as Kuttanad and Kochi, constant vigilance against brackish-water breaches was so central to survival that labourers venerated local deities like Chera Mallan, believed to protect the dykes. Yet, these same labourers had no rights over the rice they produced, except for the portions granted to them by the landlord. This dependence intensified during the monsoons. In the month of *Karkidakam*, marked by heavy rains, agricultural labourers were often unable to sustain themselves and were compelled to approach landlords to beg for rations.⁶ Known as *panja maasam* ('the month of scarcity'), *Karkidakam* exposed this caste-bound dependence and vulnerability built into this system. To sustain this labour regime, lower castes were 'allowed' to fish in the paddy fields. Fish and meat, avoided by upper castes and highly perishable before an era of refrigeration, thus became associated with lower-caste subsistence. Rice, meanwhile, dry, storable, and durable, remained firmly under upper-caste control as the primary commodity of accumulation and thus, power.

Water also functioned as a fundamental architectural element of the caste system. It was the primary object of ritual purification. The freshwater bodies enabled upper-caste bodies to cleanse themselves of perceived impurities. Gopal Guru goes far and states that water "provides the most important precondition for the survival of untouchability" (G. Guru, 2009, p. 52). Lower castes were denied access to public wells, temple ponds, and the water sources of upper-caste households. As late as the 1920s, *Mithavadi* magazine records a case in which an Ezhava man was prosecuted for bathing in a pond adjacent to a government-maintained temple in Thrippunithura (Ramadas, 2022, pp. 67–68). Thus, water in Kerala was a medium through which caste power was materialised. Agriculture, hegemony, and caste were thus tightly interwoven through regimes of water. Yet despite the abundance, the long shorelines and their significance in everyday life, these spaces remained marginal within dominant spatial imaginaries. As May Joseph observes, the coast remains a "little-understood site", a "pariah place in the ontology of dominant Indian placemaking" (2022, p. 13).

This epistemic gap did not emerge naturally. Rather, it was a coming together of agrarian power coated in religious dogma and caste disenfranchisement. For the landed elite, the coast held little agricultural value, and freshwater sources remained under control. They also had no use or means to control the open ocean, rivers, or backwaters. These were also the spaces where lower-castes laboured and lived. Their everyday proximity to water, however, did not translate into cultural capital. It is precisely this discrepancy, between Brahmanical disregard for the aquapelagic and subaltern disenfranchisement within it, that makes Narayana Guru's literary intervention so significant. Writing from a subaltern, aquapelagic lifeworld, the avarna ascetic Narayana Guru, did not claim water as a site of 'uncivilisation' or pollution, he imagines it as a structuring language through which the politics of resistance could be articulated.

⁶ *Karkidakam* is the last month of the Malayalam calendar, falling roughly between mid-July and mid-August.

The Blue Poetics of Narayana Guru

Blue Humanities intervention in Malayalam literary studies is a recent development. It has also been dominated by fiction. Udaya Kumar (2023), in his chapter “The Haunted Present”, examines how haunted subaltern pasts are embedded in the geographies of Kochi’s coastal fiction. James and Shalini (2024) read Sarah Joseph’s novel *Aathi* through an aquapelagic lens. Set on a freshwater island, the novel, they argue, shapes environmental consciousness and resistance to land-centric development. Wadhwa and Alias (2025) examine island fiction from Kochi and call for a decentring of Eurocentric frameworks and for the articulation of collective subaltern history. These works offer a nuanced perspective and reorient Malayalam towards aquatic and islanded imaginaries. However, they remain centred on the novel, and on environmental or spatial critique.

We argue that Narayana Guru’s works occupy a distinct register within Malayalam’s aquatic archive. In his literary corpus, the image of water performs two interrelated roles. First, water becomes a carrier of Advaitic thought, through which non-duality is conveyed. Second, water works as a pedagogical instrument, drawing from the relatable, everyday images, grounded in the lived, water saturated, material realities of his community. Guru’s waters are never wholly abstract. They retain a sensuous immediacy of his philosophy, one that anchors philosophical reflection in the empirical world.

In his early works, Guru returns to the sea as a man returns to a familiar place. In his devotional verses, the ocean becomes a site of personal and spiritual turmoil. His own struggles with *maya*, ascetic discipline, self-doubt, and hardships all come together in this imagery. These tensions find expression through devotion. In *Sadasivadarshanam* (‘Vision of the Eternal Siva’), his lived reality is imagined as a boiling ocean through which the subject struggles to swim, with bubbles rising as the sorrows of worldly existence. In *Siva Prasada Panchakam* (‘Five verses on the Grace of Siva’), Siva’s mercy is depicted as an overflowing ocean, inexhaustible and encompassing.

Even as Guru turns from devotional verse to didactic writing after 1897, the ocean remains, assuming a new, pedagogical role. It is in this phase that the image of water takes up the dual role, of familiar and instructive. Consider *Atmopadesa Satakam* (‘One Hundred Verses on Self-Instruction’). Of its hundred verses, thirteen deploy aquatic imagery. As the title may suggest, the work is a series of spiritual instructions: one of the earliest injunctions is the restraint of the senses. Guru reminds the reader that the physical world is an illusion:

It should thus come to pass, that all the differentiation one might encounter in the world of empirical perception be known as substantially unitive, like the oneness of the waves that constantly rise on the surface of the ocean. (N. Guru, 2005/2015, p. 278)

At a different point, he underscores the transient nature of reality through a rhetorical question: “How can there be any reality for a wave other than that of water, of which the former is only a mode?” (278).

Guru repeatedly insists on taming the ego and arriving at wisdom. In this structure, the waves feature repeatedly as ego, lasting only a moment, unstable and contingent. The body is imagined as foam, fleeting and perishable (302). The sole, everlasting truth is the ocean, unchanging, and the ultimate reality. Knowledge for Guru becomes the realisation of the transient nature of this reality and a dissolution of ego. He describes this moment of

wisdom. For the fortunate wise, he says, "the secret of the Word comes as a cosmic sound. It fills his ears and drowns everything in them like a flooded river inundating a desert" (282). Here, enlightenment is not an abstract revelation. It is an overwhelming sensory immersion. This sensory aspect of water extends to Guru's other works. In *Anukampa Dasakam* ('Ten Verses on Mercy') the absence of compassion renders the human subject desiccated and inert: "without love, grace and mercy, man is merely a foul, fleshy, walking corpse, like water lost in the desert, like a flower without smell or fruit" (380).

These verses make it evident that aquatic imagery in Narayana Guru's writing is structural, a mode of thought that facilitates instruction. The sea becomes a vehicle for pedagogy. The allegories, motifs and metaphors, drawn from the empirical reality, become foundational in that instruction. The ocean is not invoked merely for vastness or grandeur. Guru repeatedly turns to its properties: fluidity, repetition, depth, and multiplicity. Water, in fact, enables Guru to place unity and multiplicity, permanence and transience, motion and stillness without contradiction.

This reading has so far foregrounded the spiritual dimension of Guru's aquatic poetics. What remains to be examined are its political aspects. Guru was not only a spiritual instructor but also a radical social reformer. This dimension of his poetics becomes most explicit in *Daiva Dasakam* ('Ten Verses to God').

Reading *Daiva Dasakam*

Written in 1914, *Daiva Dasakam* is a ten-verse prayer hymn that occupies a singular place in Narayana Guru's corpus. Originally composed as an evening prayer for the children studying in the Sivagiri Mutt, it soon travelled far beyond that institutional setting, becoming a commonplace prayer in Ezhava households across Kerala. It is sung at weddings, housewarmings, funerals, and other occasions. This everyday ubiquity is perhaps what makes it Guru's most widely known work.

The text was conceived as a collective prayer that consistently speaks in first-person plural with 'we' and 'our' as collective nouns recurring throughout. In these verses, the devotee seeks divine guidance from an all-encompassing power. He is the creator, creation, and its very substance itself. The prayer seeks protection and provision from a world of *maya*. An absolute surrender is in offer to a god who is truth, grace and joy. The hymn culminates in a collective aspiration. It calls for divine grace, victory, and immersion in the ultimate reality. Though composed in Malayalam and placed in a specific social context, the text presents itself as a universally intelligible prayer, deliberately stripped of sectarian markers.

Daiva Dasakam is rich in oceanic imagery. For a short hymn, it devotes remarkable attention to water, with at least four verses engaging aquatic imagery at length. The hymn opens with a call to God, and this opening is unusual in several respects. Almost all Hindu devotional poetry that has emerged from Kerala is addressed to a specific god. And on most occasions, the hymn opens with *sthuthi* or praise to the aforementioned god. Guru declines to do either. By refusing to name or praise a particular god, he moves away from mythic specificity and, in a sense, from an inherited religious ownership. He bypasses the mythic and ritual frameworks controlled by Brahmanical hegemony and thereby declines legitimacy to these narratives that sanctify caste hierarchy. In this act of deliberate refusal, Guru moves devotion away from a regulated Brahmanical ownership toward a direct, unmediated

relationship with the divine. By withholding divine names and mythic identifiers, he also asserts a radical non-duality: it is God, not gods.

The prayer opens instead with an image: God as a boatman, a navigator in the ocean of change, an ocean figured as the world. The ship is not an ordinary one, but a modern steamship, voyaging across the sea. The vessel is imagined as God's own footsteps that helps the devotee transcend the material world. The first plea is not to let 'us' be, or more literally, do not let go of our hand. After introducing God as the navigator, the prayer shifts from spatial to ontological imagery. The verses proclaim the everlasting nature of the divine. When everything perishes in the end, only God remains. In this stream of thought, the ocean becomes a metaphor for Guru's Advaita, the undivided, boundless consciousness. The universe subsists within this all-encompassing divine, and the devotee seeks a similar dissolution: the merging of ego into the same boundless being.

God is simultaneity itself. He is the creator, creation and its substance. He is the maker of maya, the force that entangles beings in that maya, and also the power that liberates them from it. Time collapses in him: past, present, and future are all his domains. Even the revealed words of the prayer are acknowledged as already belonging to him. The final verses evoke God's victory. He is called upon as the protector of the miserable, an ocean of mercy. The ultimate wish is not an arrival at a distant shore from him but immersion into that self. The devotees wish to dwell within the depths of this oceanic glory, eternally, in supreme felicity. In these verses, aquatic imagery morphs into different forms. The ocean becomes a medium of navigation, a figure of totality, a source of mercy, and the promise of joyous immersion. What this close reading shows is a theological vocabulary that is also the groundwork for a spatial and political reimagination for the marginalised. In the following section, *Daiva Dasakam* will be read as a subversive intervention, through blue poetics, into the caste-regulated spaces of early-20th century Kerala.

The Subaltern Blue Poetics of *Daiva Dasakam*

The opening image of God as a boatman navigating the ocean of change becomes the hymn's central theological intervention. The vessel is also not an ordinary one. It is a modern steamship, voyaging across the waters. In both the steamship and the ocean lies the hymn's defiance. Inland waterbodies, such as ponds, wells, and parts of rivers, were heavily regulated spaces within the caste society. By placing a steamship in the open sea, Guru imagines a God radically different from hierarchy-bound, premodern divine figures produced by hegemonic discourses. The appearance of the steamship in *Daiva Dasakam* is neither an accident nor a figure of speech. It is a deliberate theological and political gesture through which Guru aligns his interpretation of divinity with material signs of colonial modernity.

By the mid-19th century, modern technology had already become an object of admiration. In *Indulekha* (1888), the first Malayalam novel, alongside the "virtues of English education," the "technological superiority of the factory," and the "kindness of colonial masters," the steam engine is described as one of the "benefits of the colonial encounter" (Arunima, 1997, p. 278). This admiration, however, was not simply a matter of fascination with novelty. It also functioned as a response to structures of Brahmanical dominance that governed land, labour, and religion in Kerala. The upper-caste elites had long exercised near-total control over Kerala's precolonial political economy. However, they possessed no comparable authority over colonial power or its technologies. Modern science and technology thus

emerged as a domain outside Brahmanical jurisdiction, unsettling a long epistemic monopoly through which caste authority had also been maintained.

Early Malayalam fiction repeatedly registers this asymmetry where encounters with modern technology are shown as beyond upper-caste comprehension and control. They become a site where Brahmanical authority is rendered epistemically vulnerable. Udaya Kumar draws attention to the character Kesavan Namboodiri in *Indulekha*, who responds to the spinning mill with a mixture of awe and suspicion. He cannot comprehend how such a machine could operate through "smoke" alone (Kumar, 2002, p. 162). He suspects that "there must be some trick inside, which these clever white men will not reveal" (161).

It is within this broader cultural and political context that Guru's invocation of a steamship in *Daiva Dasakam* must be situated. The alignment of colonial modernity with lower-caste emancipation was not unique to Kerala. As Gopal Guru has argued, across several Indian languages and regions, English education, science, and technology were perceived as relatively accessible forms of knowledge compared to the *Vedas* and *sastras* (Guru, 2011). Narayana Guru himself articulated this position with unusual clarity. During the First World War, he is said to have asked his disciples to pray for a British victory, remarking that "the British are like our gurus. It is they who gave us sannyasa," and reminding them that "sudras could not be sanyasis, even in Rama's time" (Balakrishnan, 2008, p. 166).

When Guru imagines God as a navigator aboard a steamship, he thus draws upon a shared cultural vocabulary of the time in which modern technology had already come to signify a rupture in caste authority. In *Daiva Dasakam*, the steamship becomes the vehicle of a blue poetics in which the erosion of Brahmanical epistemological control coincides with the historical emergence of a lower-caste collective capable of self-definition.

Consider Guru's God. He is the captain of the ship, and he constitutes the ocean itself. He is *maya* and the producer of that *maya*. Yet this supreme figure holds the hand of his devotee. The assemblage of travellers—the collective reciting the hymn in devotion—is protected and sustained by this God. In this sense, Guru is not reluctant to praise God. In fact, towards the end of the hymn, he repeatedly proclaims His victory. The difference lies not in the absence of praise, but in the vocabulary and stylistics through which praise is articulated. In these verses, from the very opening, Guru defies convention. Instead of *sthuthi*, the hymn addresses the god directly. There is no named deity. God is singular and encompassing. Guru resists the normative liturgical structures of Brahmanical worship. He departs from the various poetic forms that had governed devotional practice for centuries. Guru does not employ familiar mythic imagery associated with Hindu gods, nor does he invoke them by name. This departure is particularly striking when set against Guru's own earlier devotional poetry, where he frequently opens with explicit invocations of Siva, Subrahmanian, or Bhadrakali.

The God addressed in *Daiva Dasakam* is repeatedly invoked as *thampuran*. He is the provider of provisions: food and clothes, the protector of all. The term, however, bears a play of meanings. In Malayalam, *thampuran* functions simultaneously as a theological signifier to denote god and as a social marker of upper-caste male authority figures, like Brahmins and kings. The upper-caste landlord, for the Ezhavas, Pulayas and Parayas, was not far removed from God: he exercised near-absolute authority over land, property, and life. Guru's use of *thampuran* is significant, especially following the image of the captain aboard the ship. In this remarkable reworking of a loaded signifier, Guru does not reproduce the existing hierarchy. He tactfully reworks it. The hierarchical patriarch, *thampuran* as

landlord, king, and God, had historically functioned as an extractor of wealth. Thampuran taxed, appropriated the harvest from the lower-caste labour, and exploited both the bodies and minds of subordinated communities. Guru's God, by contrast, was a provider. He figures as an ideal: non-hierarchical, compassionate and accessible to those excluded from dignity. Guru detaches this divine lordship from the social economy of caste power. This semantic game is not a rejection of authority as such. Instead, it is a relocation: from land and lineage to an oceanic, sometimes utopian, relational domain beyond Brahmanical control.

Daiva Dasakam asserts dignity. The hymn does not involve self-deprecation. Self-abasement or self-deprecation is a common feature in many devotional hymns. It is especially common in Christian and Islamic prayers. A sense of universal humility and human fallibility are expressed in descriptions such as 'we are sinners' or 'we are your humble servants,' which form part of many such prayers. There are no such parallels in *Daiva Dasakam*. There is no self-abasement. Instead, there is a sense of equality in the imagery, drawn from the ship at sea. The navigator-God is not located in an exalted position. He is accessible and touchable, not far away from the devotee.

Guru's linguistic choice in this context is political rather than stylistic. In Kerala, in the presence of the king, God, and upper castes, the lower castes were expected to speak in self-deprecating terms. They were not allowed to use common terms such as *njan* (I), *njangal* (we), or *veedu* (home). Instead, terms like *adiyan* (slave) were expected to be used to denote the self, and *chanakakund* (cow-dung pit) to denote home. By contrast, the upper-caste life was elevated through exalted terms such as *thirumeni* (holy body), *palliyurakkam* (divine sleep), and the like. This vocabulary was not merely observed but enforced. As late as 1936, *Mathrubhumi* reports the lynching of an Ezhava man who was beaten to death for using *uppu* (salt), a term reserved for upper castes, instead of *pulichath* (sour), an infantilising and derogatory usage imposed on lower-caste speech (Ismael, 2009, p. 261).

Guru discards this vocabulary of self-deprecation. He accords equal dignity to both parties. God is spoken of in terms continuous with creation. This equality is natural because creation is very much a part of the creator. God is divine, but not above or below creation. He does not discriminate or show prejudice. He appears instead as a guide and navigator, someone who shows the devotee the way across the vast, endless ocean. There is also the element of accessibility. The first plea in the prayer is not to let go of 'our hand.' It is a figure of speech, and yet poignantly material. Lower castes were denied even the sight of God, let alone the possibility of touch. The right to touch God—and the right to be touched by God—belonged to upper castes. Here, Guru asks for dignification. God already holds our hand. He is urged not to let it go. Guru thus projects touchability as theology, reimagining the divine as accessible and intimate in opposition to Brahmanical regimes of exclusion.

In reading *Daiva Dasakam*, it is difficult to ignore the striking resonance with Édouard Glissant's idea of the 'Right to Opacity' (Glissant, 1997). Glissant uses the term to describe a refusal of epistemological capture. A refusal to the demand that subjects make themselves fully legible or transparent to dominant systems of knowledge. It is the right of individuals and cultures to remain irreducibly different, unexplainable on someone else's terms, and still fully be part of the world. Glissant uses this idea primarily as a response to Western epistemology and especially colonial regimes. Guru deploys it against a different hegemon: the Brahmanical, institutionally sanctioned authority of caste Hinduism. Guru's prayer is universal in its address. And yet the prayer refuses the familiar grammar through which caste Hinduism recognises the divine. This refusal is an assertion of opacity. It is not a

withdrawal, but a resistance against being standardised, categorised, assimilated, or subsumed into the larger corpus of caste Hinduism.

The steamship, set in the sea beyond the territorial control of Brahmanical authority, functions as a heterotopia. Foucault defines heterotopias as real places that function as "counter-sites" to conventional spaces (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986, p. 24). Heterotopias simultaneously mirror, contest, and invert conventional spaces. Guru's boat is a counter-site to conventional society. It places an assemblage of travellers moving across the ocean guided by the divine, without any distinction or discrimination. All are traversing the sea of illusion, and all their eventual destination is the ultimate reality. Guru's God, the merciful and the compassionate, is the leader of the ship. This imagery mirrors a hierarchy-ridden, violent, discriminatory, humiliating structure in the real world. Foucault argues that heterotopias often shape and reflect society's hidden structures and contradictions. By situating this collective prayer within a heterotopia, Guru does not offer solace but awakens a critical consciousness. The worshipper sees the stark contradiction between the ideal and the real and does not go back relaxed. The prayer is not a pacifier. It is an exercise for equality.

Placing the prayer in the sea was not an abstraction. It was also an understanding of power. For Guru, writing *Daiva Dasakam* in 1914 had a historical precedent to follow. In 1913, the Kochi Pulaya Maha Sabha requested a space for a meeting in Kochi. Despite repeated requests to several authorities, no permission was granted, citing the 'lower' status of the community and the doctrines of pollution. No upper-caste community was willing to offer a space for conducting the meeting. The Pulayas were an untouchable Dalit community, formerly agrestic slave castes. Given this situation, they arrived at a novel solution. By tying a number of boats together in the backwaters of Kochi, they conducted the meeting on water. They discussed their collective concerns: discrimination, segregation, and mistreatment. People joined in large numbers, arriving in small catamarans and boats. This event came to be known as the *Kayal Sammelanam* ('Meeting on the Backwaters'). It was a pioneering moment in the history of social reform in Kerala. Although accounts vary on the exact location, time, duration, and the manner in which the boats were assembled, the historical significance of *Kayal Sammelanam* is not contested. The sea did not have caste, and it was a revolutionary idea.

Daiva Dasakam was written in 1914, a year after *Kayal Sammelanam*. Placing God and community within the image of the ocean was, therefore, not merely symbolic. It was grounded in material reality. *Daiva Dasakam* must thus be read through this aquapelagic spatial imagination that resonates with the historical context in which Guru was writing. The hegemony of caste had no authority over the sea. Their power was limited to the land. Through *Daiva Dasakam* Guru primarily does two things. Employing his interpretation of Advaita as a base, he creates a god. It is not a hierarchical god who treats people differently. There is no mediator. The prayer is direct, and the god is not far away. He is the captain of the boat on which the devotees travel. He is the very ocean that he helps the devotees navigate. He is the ocean of divine mercy to which the devotees wish to submerge. Second, in the very act of this creation, he constructs a community: the Ezhava community and, at large, the *avarna* collective. *Daiva Dasakam* is by an *avarna* ascetic conceived according to his own vision of God. It is not a Brahmin-dictated, Brahmin-mediated hymn where the lower-caste communities are mere spectators or even not that. By defying the hegemony and refusing to standardise the prayer according to Brahmin idioms and standards, Guru is exercising what Glissant described as opacity. Guru's theological interpretation reconfigures ways in which collective identity becomes possible in caste-ridden colonial Kerala. His God

is intimate, touchable, and perhaps more importantly, not assimilable to the symbolic economy of caste power. The prayer articulates a right, a lower-caste right to self-definition: to imagine God, community, and dignity in their own terms, a right that needs no validation from existing structures of authority. This, however, is not a poetics of isolation. Like Glissant, Guru's discourse is also that of relation: universal in its address and yet defying translation to the language of caste. In this context, opacity becomes a mode of ethical and communal self-assertion: a refusal to be reduced to caste legibility, and an insistence on a dignified and relational existence. The oceanic imagery and the steamship do not constitute a familiar space. It is beyond the realm of the upper-caste control. By placing the hymn in the ocean, Guru cuts the umbilical cord of power legitimised by doctrinal and legal authority founded on land control and the caste system. In this Foucauldian heterotopia, the boat holds an assemblage of travellers, where no hierarchy is possible.

Conclusion

Sree Narayana Guru's *Daiva Dasakam* stands as a landmark text in Malayalam literature. Through a close reading of *Daiva Dasakam*, this study demonstrates how Guru's prayer constructs a theology that is simultaneously egalitarian, collective, and resistant to hegemonic power structures. Water imagery in *Daiva Dasakam* thus takes multiple roles. Through the steamship, the ocean, the language of dignity, the navigator-God, and the collective nature of the prayer, *Daiva Dasakam* articulates an aquatic theology. The sea becomes a material and historical counter-site where caste authority is rendered inoperative. In this shift to the ocean, the hymn pushes a subaltern ontology in which dignity, touchability and a collective self-definition become possible. *Daiva Dasakam*, thus, is not only a prayer. It is also a call for spatial and theological reorganisation of caste in colonial Kerala.

This article has placed the caste-bound waterscapes of colonial Kerala at the centre of aquapelagic thought, framing Sree Narayana Guru's hymn as a spatial and theological reimagination. Through an aquapelagic reading of a prayer emerging from an avarna community along the Indian Ocean littoral, the article expands the scope of the Blue Humanities beyond colonial and environmental concerns to include subaltern epistemologies. Here, the ocean is not a backdrop to empire or an abstract metaphor for life. In the collective performances of Ezhava everyday life, this oceanic imaginary in *Daiva Dasakam* becomes an avenue for a critical epistemology formed out of marginalised navigation. In this sense, the aquapelagic emerges as a foundational analytic for understanding subaltern poetics. Caste, in this context, must be understood as a fundamental organising principle of these water-worlds. To study the aquapelagic, therefore, is also to engage the politics of touch, mobility, and ontological sovereignty.

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