



One in Essence: An Analysis of Nancy Yeilding's *Narayana Guru, A Life of Liberating Love*

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Abstract:

Sri Narayana Guru (1855-1928) is arguably the most discussed and celebrated Malayali ever and no wonder there is a burgeoning field of literature on him in Malayalam and other languages. The endlessly fascinating, inscrutable life of the Guru presents a daring yet endearing challenge to the art of the biographer. A life as complex and multidimensional as the Guru's cannot be reduced to a written biography but many writers have taken up this daunting task over the last 100 years and one of the latest additions to this seemingly indefinite list is Nancy Yeilding's *Narayana Guru: A Life of Liberating Love*. This article argues that Yeilding's work is unique among Guru's biographies as it locates Guru in the borderlines of socio-politics and mysticism, rather than presenting him as a mere socio-political engineer or a miracle man. By employing unitive philosophy as both its subject matter and narrative methodology, Fielding's narrative overcomes many of the limitations of biographical literature on Guru and establishes itself as a rare exercise in philosophical biography.

Keywords: biography, hagiography, appropriation, absolute, Advaita, Vedanta, Guru, Kerala, renaissance, modernity



A mystic, an epistemologist, an embodiment of pure consciousness and a widely acknowledged architect of modern Kerala, Narayana Guru remains one of the most contested and bewildering figures in modern Indian history. The vast and varied corpus of literature available in different languages on the life and work of the Guru, written from distinctive ideological perspectives, further obfuscates and fractures his true identity. The most biographed Malayali ever, his life and work has been a source of hundreds of biographies, biopics, sculptures, critical texts, sociopolitical analyses, historical fiction, children's adaptations, and literary as well as philosophical discourses. Available biographical literature on Guru falls largely into two major categories: leftist socio-political analyses that position the Guru as a secular social reformer who fought against caste-based discrimination and exploitation, and the hagiographical expositions (*Charitams*) that idolize Guru as a mystic avatar. In addition to these two, the recent attempts by certain historians to appropriate his legacy and brand him as a regional saint in the *Sanatana* tradition have further complicated the already highly contested discourse on Guru (Buchanan 4).

The prevailing narrative landscape on the Guru, marred by political co-optation, caste-based identity politics, ideological appropriation and philosophical oversimplification, has made it a daunting task for the contemporary biographer to capture a holistic estimate of Guru's life and legacy. The lack of verifiable historical documents regarding his early life, often substituted by highly imaginative hagiography and mythologization, presents a huge challenge while writing his biography. Apart from this, appreciating the polymathic mind of Guru expressed through his deeply philosophical poems written in three languages, requires immense linguistic awareness and profound intellectual exposure to traditional Indian philosophy. Given the enormity and complexity of the task, it is not surprising that noted biographers of Guru include some of the finest minds in Malayalam literature like Kumaran Asan, Moorkoth Kumaran, M.K. Sanoo, P.K. Balakrishnan, K.P. Appan, Guru Nitya Chaithanya Yati and P. Parameshwaran.

Nancy Yeilding's *Narayana Guru: A Life of Liberating Love* marks a radical departure from the prevailing paradigm of biographical literature on the Guru in Malayalam and other languages. A product of painstaking research and profound contemplation spread over nearly three decades, Yeilding's work is marked by a certain spiritual *bhava* that reveals the multifaceted genius of Guru, re

veals to us his inner life and demonstrates his pure essence as an "embodiment of wisdom" (Prasad vii). Her unique positionality as an outsider-insider— one who does not belong to the region, language or culture the Guru represents, yet one who has been rigorously trained in Guru's theory and praxis—brings in a rare perspective. Her identity as an American scholar trained under Nitya Chaithanya Yati at the Narayana Gurukula helps Yeilding employ a global perspective avoiding narrow, vested interests with respect to the Guru's enduring legacy. At the same time, the discipleship under Yati and her longstanding association with the Gurukula helps her avoid the orientalist proclivity for exoticization of Indian saints.

True to the interpretive lineage of Guru's philosophy upheld by Narayana Gurukula, Yeilding employs a phenomenological methodology of "unitive understanding" to explore Guru as a manifestation of pure consciousness. She seems fully aware of the limitations of traditional modes of western biographies premised on a distinct separation of the subject and the object; individual and society. Such models grounded on psychological reductionism are hardly productive when writing



about a unitive philosopher like Narayana Guru who had effaced all differences between the self and the other. As non-dual actions cannot be fitted into a dualistic architecture, writing about the life of Narayana Guru requires a radically different narrative strategy. Accordingly, Yeilding employs a phenomenological perspective, finding its expression through a highly experiential and reflective prose. Rather than presenting a series of events in Guru's life, she trains the lens on the subjective, internal layers of his consciousness. She grounds her phenomenological method in Husserl's notion of *epoché* (Husserl 45), the philosophical suspension of all external assumptions to examine the pure essence of phenomena. This helps her to sideline the parochial sociological labels attributed to the Guru and analyze how his consciousness was always directed towards a sense of oneness.

Most biographies of Guru are premised on a strict bifurcation between his mystic and social lives and sees his early life as a *parivrajaka* as a mere prelude to his life as a social reformer. Yeilding overcomes this inevitable challenge of reconciling Guru's radical social interventions with his profound metaphysical interiority by anchoring the narrative in Guru's unitive vision. Classical Advaita often considered the transactional world (*samsara*) as an illusion (*maya*) and hence turned a blind eye to prevailing social inequalities as they were deemed insignificant when viewed from the perspective of ultimate truth (*paramartha*). Guru took Advaita (non-dualism) to its logical conclusion and argued that for it to be true, there should be no discrimination of any form in society, thus rectifying a historical misappropriation of the principle. Yeilding resolves the apparently contradictory aspects of Guru's life by seeing his actions as a natural consequence of his inner realization of the Absolute. For instance, in Yeilding's biography of Guru, the historic Aruvippuram installation of 1888 is presented as a practical illustration of Advaita (locating the divine in a mere stone) rather than as a subaltern political challenge to the feudal hierarchy of the time.

Yeilding's fascinating narrative takes us into the history and ethos of modern-day Kerala through the life of its most influential contemplative. She describes in detail the theocratic exploitative social structure of that time and the silent revolution Guru's words and actions brought about in the society assuring self-respect and dignity for the masses dehumanised by the scourge of casteism. The usual tropes regarding Guru's life found in his biographies find their way into Yeilding's work too—his early days in Chempazhanthi village, childhood education, wandering life, friendship with Chattampi Swamikal, meditation at Marutvamalai, return to the masses, consecration of Siva temple at Aruvippuram, involvement in Vaikom Satyagraha, historic meeting with Gandhi, visit to Thiruvannamalai and Ceylon, and the final Samadhi in 1928. However, Yeilding's focus is always on the "pure consciousness" from which the transformative actions arose. In this sense, one may very well locate this biography in the subtle liminalities of socio-politics and metaphysics.

The biography is cleverly structured into nine chapters in order to mirror the metaphysical evolution of Guru's perennial vision, emanating from his solitary interiority as a child in a remote South Indian village and gradually spreading its wings to embrace global humanity. Yeilding calls the first chapter of the biography, "Nature Naturing," immediately alluding to the monism of Spinoza. Here, Yeilding articulates Guru's deep connection to nature and rustic life in his local village as the foundation of his later philosophical metamorphosis. His spiritual orientation at a very early stage helped him experience the active, singular essence of reality, *Natura naturans* (Spinoza 434). Even as a very young boy he realized that if everything is a manifestation of the same divine substance, then human



inequalities cannot be logically accepted. His early life is thus presented as a foundational space where the infinite substance structured itself to destroy the illusions of *Natura naturata* (casteist discrimination and exploitation). Yeilding's narrative further expands in concentric circles, mirroring the ripple effect Guru's life and work had on the larger world outside. Chapters 2 ("Culturing") and 3 ("Wandering Life") trace Guru's early education and his experiences as an itinerant mendicant. The following chapters ("From Alone to the Alone") and ("Dispeller of Darkness") present Guru's life of solitary penance at Marutwamala hill and his subsequent return to the society to practice Advaita. Chapters 6 and 7, ("Ripples Moving Out from the Centre" and "Narayana Guru and Mahatma Gandhi"), clearly establish Guru's societal interventions and their impact on the national movement as a clear outcome of his interior self-realization. The final chapters ("Mercy and Laughter" and "One Self, One World"), are attempts to humanize the Guru and project Guru's philosophy of universal humanism on the global stage.

Yeilding masterfully uses philosophy to illustrate the biography and the biographical elements to elucidate the philosophy. Events/non-events from Guru's life are carefully chosen and sprinkled with a slice of his own poetry so as to illuminate the fascinating aspects of his spiritual Odyssey. For instance, while commenting on Guru's tolerance and compassion for those who steadfastly clung to casteist prejudices, Yeilding brings in ideas from *Cijjada Cinthanam* where Guru sees inertia (unwillingness to change) as a part of the cosmic design and contrasts it with the light of consciousness. One defining characteristic of Guru's personality was his sense of mercy and compassion which was not limited to human beings. The author recalls an instance when Guru refused to install an idol after seeing crushed ants on the pedestal. She quotes from Guru's *Anukampadasakam (Ten Verses on Mercy)*: "Such Mercy that even to an ant / Would brook not the least harm to befall" (141). The sense of compassion, spirit of self-sacrifice, gentle ways and simple life among the people bring him closer to the figure of Christ and Yeilding who brings the best of both East and West to the text does not shy away from a comparison. The subtitle of the book itself, with its idea of "liberating love," points in this direction. Yeilding writes: "Like Jesus, he attracted many listeners to his gentle words, followers to his simple path, and disciples to his teaching" (136).

The alchemy of Guru-Shishya relationship comes alive while discussing Guru's rapport with a wide range of "disciples" with conflicting ideas, ranging from the poet-legislator, Kumaran Asan to the hardcore rationalist, Sahodaran Ayyappan. Yeilding alludes to Asan's indebtedness to Guru and briefly discusses Asan's major works like *Karuna* and *Chandalabhikshuki* which exemplify qualities like compassion and transcendence of passion through which the individual soul merges with the Absolute. Guru's historic association with Dr Palpu, a practitioner of modern medicine who was denied a job by the Travancore administration for being an *Avarna*, T. K. Madhavan (leader of Indian National Congress) and Nataraja Guru who later founded the Narayana Gurukula in Varkala finds befitting treatment in this biography. These brief but compelling episodes of encounters with multiple luminaries who embodied diverse ideologies reveal the unitive nature of Guru's personality, besides offering valuable insights into the transformative history of modern Kerala.

One major historical event explored in detail is the Vaikom Satyagraha which set the stage for Gandhi-Guru interface on *Chaturvarnya* and the nature of spiritual endurance. "The Guru's words and example stayed with Gandhi . . . He wrote about that recognition in *Young India* under the heading,



‘Caste must Go,’ repudiating much of what he had previously said in support of the caste system” (131). The author carefully delineates Guru’s opinion regarding the Satyagraha at Vaikom demanding access to public roads around the Vaikom temple and compares it with that of Gandhi who temporarily misunderstood Guru’s advice to volunteers as a call for violence. Guru never took the path of confrontation and intimidation but always chose one of accommodation rooted in magnanimity and compassion. Yeilding thus uses the event to explore Guru’s unitive understanding of the world. Even Guru’s disagreement with Gandhi regarding the *varnashrama* system and the mode of protest at Vaikom is presented in the light of unitive philosophy. Yeilding writes: “With gentle words and a powerful example, not through any overt pressure, the Guru enabled Gandhi’s process of ridding himself of prejudices that blinded him despite his sincere caring and great sacrifice for the welfare of all. Guru’s life again and again demonstrated that the most effective way of changing the world is to change one’s self” (130).

One remarkable feature of Yeilding’s work is the way it explores Guru’s philosophical poems as biographical artifacts that mirror the evolution of his consciousness. By grounding her work in the philosophical lineage of Guru, Yeilding differentiates her narrative from the usual biographies of Guru that are based on historical documents and hearsay. She intersperses the narrative with contextual discussions of Guru’s philosophical works like *Daivadasakam (Universal Prayer)*, *Atmopadesasatakam (One Hundred Verses of Self-instruction)*, *Cijjada Cinthanam (Reflections on Consciousness and Inert Matter)* and *Advaita Deepika (The Lamp of Non-duality)*, along with commentaries by Nataraja Guru and Nitya Chaithanya Yati. For example, while presenting the All-Religions Conference the Guru organized at Alwaye in 1924 as a concrete manifestation of Guru’s unitive philosophy that accommodated all religious philosophies as ways different to *moksha*, Yeilding turns to a discussion of Guru’s *One Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction*:

The many faiths have but one essence;

Not seeing this, in this world, like the blind men and the elephant,

*Many kinds of reasoning are used by the unenlightened who
become distressed;*

Having seen this, without being disturbed, remain steadfast. (qtd. in Yeilding 153)

Nancy Yeilding’s *Narayana Guru: A Life of Liberating Love* marks a significant turn in the evolution of biographical literature on Narayana Guru. Without Eurocentric reductionism or orientalist exoticism, Yeilding dismantles the dualistic framework that has traditionally hampered the biographical narratives on Narayana Guru and enunciates Guru’s life from the perspective of his own unitive humanism. By rejecting hagiographical tropes and without solely relying on institutionalized historical reportage, she presents Guru not as a subaltern social reformer of twentieth century Kerala or as a mystic-ascetic worshipped by millions, but as a truly universal unitive human whose philosophy of transcendental oneness offers profound answers to the contemporary global crises of humanity.

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