

Vaikunda Swami: A Case Study of Socio-Religious Awakening in South India

The nineteenth century witnessed the genesis and spread of a number of socio-religious movements which were aimed at reforming the Hindu society and religion. It has been generally portrayed as an era of re-awakening in the realm of socio-religious, political and cultural life. A critical outlook on the past and new aspiration for the future marked the awakening. Reason and judgement took the place of birth and belief; superstition yielded to science; immobility was replaced by progress, and a zeal for reform of proved abuses overpowered age-long apathy and inertia and a complacent acquiescence in whatever was current in society.¹ Almost all movements were launched against the age-old fossilized customs and superstitious beliefs.

Raja Rammohan Ray's Brahma Samaj, Atmaram Pandurang's Prarthana Samaj, Swami Dayananda Saraswathi's Arya Samaj and Swami Vivekananda's Ramakrishna Mission are the major movements which originated in North India and attempted to put an end to the age-old customs like Sati, female infanticide, enforced widowhood, *parda* system and idol worship. But these movements failed to identify themselves as popular movements and were mostly confined to a few educated people and the caste Hindus. The leaders of the movement were unable to break out of their caste circle. Leaders like Raja Rammohan Ray and Devendranath Tagore were not prepared to discard the symbol of their Brahmin caste, the sacred thread.² The Adi Brahma Samaj opposed the radical reform for widow-remarriage, renunciation of caste and the participation of non-Brahmins in religious functions. None of the movements triggered a mass movement though the Arya Samaj came close to it.³

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1. R. C. Majumdar and others, *An Advanced History of India*, Part III (London: 1967), p. 806.
 2. V. R. Narla, *Veerasingam*, (New Delhi: 1968), p. 11.
 3. Percival Spear, *A History of India*, Vol. II, (New York: 1970), p. 165.

The socio-religious movements enunciated by Vaikunda Swāmi, Narayana Guru, St Ramalinga and Veeresalingam heralded the beginning of the social awakening in South India. But due importance is not given to these movements, popular in South India, which sprang mostly from the lowest rung of the society. The curiosity of the present author to explore the little known facets of the social history of modern South India made him undertake the reform activities of Vaikunda Swāmi for the M. Phil. Dissertation, in 1980. The present paper is largely based on this unpublished thesis.

During the time of Vaikunda Swāmi, the society continued to be feudalistic in nature. Caste system existed in all its rigidity and severity. The society was divided into two major sections, namely the *Savarnas* or the upper class and the *Avarnas* or the lower class. The Brahmins and the Nairs were considered to be *Savarnas* and enjoyed vast privileges. The rest of the society including the Nadars, Ilavas, Parayas and Pulayas were regarded as *Avarnas* and were treated as untouchables by the *Savarnas*.

The Brahmins occupied the highest position in the social hierarchy. The Nairs and the lower caste people looked upon them as 'the holiest of human beings and the visible representations of God on earth' (*Bhūdēvans*).⁴ They controlled the kings, guided their destiny and enacted the laws. They were free from all social and religious disabilities. No Brahmin could be sentenced to death, however heinous his crime.⁵ They organized a systematic gradation of untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability among the various castes.⁶ If any lower caste person dared to come within the polluting distance of a high caste person, he could be put to death immediately. "When the Nairs go about the town and come across the villains", says Francois-Pyrard, "they cry Po Po that is, that they should get out of the way, otherwise, if they should chance to touch they would resent it and would strike them".⁷ If the poor wretch who tills the land and reaps the grain

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4. L. K. Anantha Krishna Iyer, *The Cochin Tribes and Castes*, Vol. II (Madras: 1912), p. 218.
 5. Francis Buchanan, *Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar*, Vol. II, (London: 1807), p. 325.
 6. K. K. Pillay, *Presidential Address in South Indian History Congress*, Inaugural session, Madurai, 1980, p. 32.
 7. Pyrard de Laval, *Voyage to the East Indies*, (London: 1798), P. 384.

should happen accidentally and ignorantly to cross the path of any Nair, the latter would draw his sword and kill him on the spot with impunity.⁸ In general, the debasing quality of the caste system made the higher classes despise the lower strata of society and push them out of the pale of civilized society.⁹

The lower castes are called *Nisha* or *Candala* which mean the contemptible, low, impure. To these castes belong the fisherman, the *cianas* or labourers in the garden; the *parrean* or skinners; persons who clean ponds; barbers and potters. The remaining are only slaves but a very useful class of persons for they guard the fruits of the earth, look after the buffaloes employed in ploughing, take care of the crops and separate the chaff from the grain.¹⁰ They rendered immense service to the society. But in return for their service, they received nothing but contempt and neglect. Their name is associated with plague; the higher classes view their presence with a mixed feeling of alarm and indignation and even towns and markets would be regarded as defiled by their approach.¹¹ Col. Macaulay wrote that "the insecurity of property and miserable servitude of the peasantry in parts of Maharashtra, Arcot are well-known but the state of the most oppressed of the inhabitants of these parts is a state of independent and exalted happiness when contrasted with the wretchedness and degradation of the beings in human shape who have the misfortune to be born in Malabar or Travancore."¹²

The Nadar caste, the parental community of Vaikunda Swāmi, was a degraded one in all walks of life on the eve of his birth. In the social life of the Nadars many restrictions were imposed upon the exercise of their personal liberty. Like other lower caste people, the Nadars were also not permitted to approach those of higher castes and they had to maintain fixed distances as prescribed for them. A Nadar was required to remain twenty-four paces away from a Nambudiri

8. B. Sobhanan, *Ramavarma of Travancore*, (Calicut : 1978), p. 72.

9. T. K. Ravindran, *Asan and Social Revolution*, (Trivandrum : 1972). p. ii.

10. Fra Bartholomeo, *A Voyage to the East Indies*, (London : 1800) p. 308.

11. Ward and Conner, *Geographical and Statistical Memoir of the Survey of the Travancore and Cochin States*, (Travancore : Circar Press, 1863), p. 140.

12. B. Sobhanan, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

Brahman, and twelve paces from a Nair.¹³ They had no right to build two-storied houses, to wear gold ornaments or to sport an umbrella.¹⁴ They were strictly forbidden to wear shoes, to milk cows, to use the public roads, bridges and well, and to enter the case Hindus' villages and streets.¹⁵ They were also denied right to enter public schools, law-courts and government offices; to take up public services and to use the common language of the country. Even some items of food such as oil, milk and butter, touched by the Nadars became polluted and could not be used by the higher caste people. Their women were not permitted to carry pots of water on their hips and to cover the upper portion of their bodies.¹⁶

The Nadars were compelled to pay several burdensome taxes to the government. The Administrative Report for M.E. 1040 gives an astounding list of over 110 distinct taxes. The tax-collectors inflated the taxes arbitrarily and instilled fear in the minds of the poor people.¹⁷ Besides the oppressive taxes, the Nadars were forced to perform *sirkar uliam* or personal gratuitous services and forced labour for the government and temples.¹⁸ As for religious practices, the government temples and the temple streets were out of bounds for them. They practised demon worship. Their religious life was founded not on love but on fear.¹⁹ It was in the midst of this critical situation that Vaikunda Swāmi appeared in order to reform the life of the people in the lower strata of the society.

Born in a poor Nadar family in 1808 A.D. at Samithope, a village, five miles north-west of Kanniyakumari, Vaikunda Swāmi studied the *Purānas* and the epics of the Hindu religion as well as other religious literature of various faiths besides Tamil moral works like *Tirukkural*, *Naladi* and *Pazhamozhi*, and derived great inspiration from them. In his boyhood Vaikunda Swāmi was known as Muthukutti. He displayed signs of greatness and individuality right from his boyhood

13. J. H. Hutton, *Caste in India*, (Bombay : 1969), p. 122.

14. J. N. Battacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*, (Calcutta : 1896), p. 259.

15. Samuel Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, (London : 1883), p. 294.

16. Samuel Mateer, *Land of Charity*, (London : 1871), p. 41.

17. C. M. Agur, *Church History of Travancore*, (Madras : 1903), p. 573.

18. Samuel Mateer, *Native Life of Travancore*, p. 290.

19. C. Silvester Horne, *The Story of the L. M. S.*, (London : 1908), p. 301.

days. At the age of twenty he fell ill and suffered a great deal. In 1832 he had finally to be taken to Tiruchendur, a famous Hindu pilgrimage centre, for a sacred bath in order to cure his disease.²⁰ At Tiruchendur he attained revelation and declared himself the Son of lord Vishnu. Also he assumed the name Vaikundar and started his public life. There he appealed to the assembled people that Lord Vishnu had sent him mainly for the unification of all human folk without any differences of caste or creed or religious prejudice, and also for initiating the reign of *dharmā*.²²

After his return to the native village Vaikunda Swāmi commenced his socio-religious activities in 1833. Large numbers of people came from nearby areas to seek the blessings of the Swāmi. Using his miraculous powers, he cured the diseases of the people and advised them on how to lead a peaceful, healthy life. His acts of healing attracted more people. Utilising his healing services as a means he stressed the need for the immediate removal of the evil customs and practices. In his preachings he appealed for promotion of unity, charity, self respect, love and truth among the people. Some of his preachings were revolutionary in character. On one occasion he declared:

Since now you all live in unity
 Don't give offering to any temple
 Don't carry *Kavadi* to any place
 Enjoy your earnings for your life
 Don't waste it in vain
 Hereafter you should not fear others²³

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20. In those days "the salutary effects of the bath being fully recognized, a bath was finally considered a remedy for all complaints". Abbe J. A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, (New Delhi : 1973), pp. 203-204.
21. T. Bala Ramachandran (ed.), *Ahila Thirattu Ammānai*, Samithope, 1153, p. 218. *Ahila Thirattu Ammānai* was written by Arigopalan, one of the five disciples of Vaikunda Swāmi. Up to 1939, it was available only in palm leaf form because his followers were afraid to print it as it contained severe criticism against the king of Travancore and the higher caste people. The printing of the *Ammānai* took place only in 1939. The followers of Vaikunda Swāmi regarded the *Ammānai* as their Bible. They still continue the practice of reading it with great devotion in the temple dedicated to Vaikunda Swāmi. Hereafter *Ahila Thirattu Ammānai* is referred to as *Ahilam*.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 239-240.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 251.

On another occasion he appealed to the people,
Don't prostrate before anybody
My children! there is nothing to fear
I will put an end to all your enemies²⁴

.....

Kali is not like a rat
So no need for arrow and stick to kill it.
But self-respect is sufficient to dispel *Kali*!²⁵

Vaikunda Swāmi vehemently criticized Swathi Tirunal, the ruler of Travancore (1829-1847) for neglecting the welfare of the lower caste people. His open criticism gave rise to the enmity of both the government and the high caste people. The high caste people plotted against his life but failed in their attempt and, finally, petitioned Swathi Tirunal. After an enquiry the king ordered the imprisonment of Vaikunda Swāmi for a period of one hundred and ten days. During his imprisonment he was subjected to several trials and tribulations. Ultimately he was released on the condition that 'he would not invite the people of other castes and take interest in them'.²⁶ However, after his release, he continued his work with added vigour.

He struggled hard to remove the inequality based on birth and to establish a casteless society. He condemned those who divided the society into so many watertight compartments, and severely criticised the conservative attitude of the Nambudiries. He advised his followers to assume all the special powers and privileges hitherto enjoyed by the Brahmins.²⁷

Vaikunda Swāmi tried to remove the humility which was imposed on the lower caste people by the government and the caste Hindus. In those days non-caste Hindus were not allowed to wear cloth as des-

24. T. Bala Ramachandran (ed.), *Arulnāl*, Samithope, 1972, p. 39. *Arulnāl*, a supplementary work to the *Ahila Thirattu Ammanāi*, contains a detailed description of the teachings and work of Vaikunda Swāmi. It has also furnished valuable informations for this paper.

25. *Ahilam*, p. 206.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 274.

27. *Arulnāl*, p. 67.

ending below the knee or above the waist.²⁸ Vaikunda Swāmi inspired his followers to wear turbans on their heads. Generally, the turban was regarded as a symbol of self-respect and heroism. Vaikunda Swāmi used the turban as a means to inspire the lower sections to lead an independent, respectable life. His followers continued to wear turbans without any fear even in the presence of the opposing caste Hindus and even now they wear turbans at the time of their worship in the temple dedicated to Vaikunda Swāmi.

Vaikunda Swāmi organised a society to establish equality among the various castes. It was popularly called *Samattuva Samājam*, an association to establish equality.²⁹ Thousands of people enrolled themselves as members of the society. Among these Vaikunda Swāmi had five prime disciples viz., Sivanandī, Pandaram, Arjunan, Subbiah and Arigopalan. He trained his disciples to preach and practise his doctrines among the people. He advised them not to force their message on unwilling hearers.³⁰ He requested his followers to practise the principle of *dharma* and urged them to establish an equalitarian society. The non-caste people gave a warm welcome to the disciples and sincerely accepted their teachings and adhered to them.³¹

Vaikunda Swāmi introduced the inter-dining programme with a view to abolishing the custom of untouchability. He prepared a favourable atmosphere for promoting inter-dining among the people of various castes. The followers of Vaikunda Swāmi, irrespective of their castes, brought food stuff and prepared food at his place and he ate along with them.³² His disciples were sent to the houses of poor people in order to partake of their food. The Pariahs, the Pallas, the Vannars and the other degraded, low caste people regarded Vaikunda Swāmi as their affectionate father.³³

28. Hardgrave, *The Nadars of Tamil Nad*, (Bombay : 1969), p. 59.

29. R. N. Yesudas, *A people's Revolt in Travancore*, (Trivandrum : 1975), p. 135.

30. *Arulnāl*, p. 51.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

32. *Ahilam*, p. 241.

33. C. Umai Thanu and P. Kasi Udayam, *Bhagavān Vaikunda Swāmigal Varalāru*, Nagercoil, 1966, p. 183.

Vaikundar established many *Nizhal Thankals* or *Inattankals*³⁴ to propagate his faith and to feed the poor. He used these *Nizhal Thankals* as an institution to unite people of all castes and to serve as a charity endowment to propagate his ideas and to preach equality among people of various castes. He asked his people to follow his words faithfully, in the strictest sense, and warned that if any one violated his instructions in performing their service in the *Nizhal Thankals* they would be punished. He instructed his followers to adopt a strict code of discipline in conducting the work of the *Nizhal Thankals*.³⁵

He established the *Nizhal Thankals* at Chettikudiyiruppu, Agasteeswaram, Sundavilai, Vadali Vilai (all in Kanniyakumari District), Kadambankulam and Parambankulam (in Tirunelveli District). On the same lines, his followers later established thousands of *Nizhal Thankals* all over the southern districts of Tamil Nadu and in some places in Kerala. The common people call these *Nizhal Thankals* Narayana Swāmi kovil or Narayana Swāmi pathi. People of various castes performed their regular worship in these coils.³⁶ They conduct festivals, generally, twice or three times in a year. The festival is generally called *pālvaippu vizha*, and on this occasion they extended acts of charity to the poor people. Their religious function is mostly concerned with charity. Thus the *Nizhal Thankals* emerged as *dharma paripālana illams*. The followers of Vaikunda Swami strictly avoided making any offerings to other Hindu temples. Their worship is nothing but doing *dharma* in the name of *Ayya* (Vaikundar).

In those days the lower caste people were not accustomed to taking regular bath and they rarely washed their clothes properly because of their heavy work. Vaikunda Swāmi wanted to inculcate in them the ideas of purity of body and equality of thought and action. He instructed his followers to lead *dapa* at Muttappati, a coastal village near

34. At present large numbers of *Nizhal Thānkals* are to be found in the different places of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The Barbers, Chettis, Nadars, Pallas, Pariahs, Vannars, Vellalas, Kannikkars, Nairs, Panikkars, Ezlavas, Tevars, Nāmbiars and several other castes conduct *Nizhal Thānkals*.

35. *Arulnāl*, p. 37.

36. The high caste people like Vellalas also had the custom of worshipping in these coils. C. Desika Vinayagam Pillai, *Nānchil Nāttu Marumakkal Vazhi Mānmiyam*, Madras, 1965, p. 112.

Kanniyakumari, and conducted *Thuvayal Panthi* (a course for leading a healthy life).³⁷ Nearly seven hundred families participated in that *panthi*. Vaikunda Swāmi trained them to wash their clothes, take regular bath, and eat simple vegetarian food. He also instructed them to take food only after prayer. He required his followers to have regular prayer sessions in the morning, at noon and in the evening every day.³⁸ Thus in the *Thvayal panthi*, Vaikundar prepared his people to lead a planned and clean life.

He also tried to change the pattern of their housing. During that period, many restrictions were imposed on the lower castes even in the construction of their houses. Their dwellings were scattered and not clustered together on either side of the street or road. There were no public lanes or streets connecting one dwelling with another.³⁹ He directed his people to construct their dwellings or settlements in a regular order and to provide doors on all the four sides for their houses.⁴⁰

The lower castes were prohibited from drawing water from public wells and ponds.⁴¹ The high caste people had separate wells and these were protected from the presence and pollution of the lower sections. The high caste people took bath, using temple *teppakkulams* (ponds) before performing their worship in their temples,⁴² but the lower caste people were strictly prohibited from doing so. Vaikunda Swāmi transgressed the prevailing order and dug a well, popularly called *Muttiri Kinaru*, at Samithope. It was thrown open to all people irrespective of their caste or religion.⁴³ The people took their sacred bath using this well, in the name of *Muttiri Patham*.⁴⁴ It aroused the enmity of the high caste people because they feared the unity of the lower castes. So they tried to prevent the people from taking their bath in commu-

37. *Ahilam*, p. 283.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 281.

39. *Census of India*, 1961, Vol. IX, Part VI, (Madras : 1965), pp. 1-2.

40. *Ahilam*, p. 281.

41. K. K. Kusuman, *Slavery in Travancore*, (Trivandrum : 1973), p. 72.

42. This custom still prevails among the Hindus.

43. *Ahilam*, p. 240.

44. The custom of taking *Muttiri Patham* or sacred bath using that well is popular even now. The devotees of Vaikunda Swāmi take *Muttiri Patham* before their worship in the temple. They regarded it as holy water and they used to take it for curing their diseases.

nity. They put poison in the well.⁴⁵ Their attempt was frustrated by the miraculous power of Vaikunda Swāmi. The people continued to assemble in large numbers and continued their ceremonial bath, sinking all their differences.

Vaikunda Swāmi attached much importance to sincere love and affection in their daily life. He considered these qualities the slogans of his movement. He adopted a flag for his movement which was popularly called *Anbukodi* or Love Flag. He called his followers *Anbukodi Makkal*⁴⁶ or Love Flag Sons. The flag is red-ochre in colour—to symbolize sacrifice and strong mind—with a white mark. This mark stands for purity, peace and love. The mark is also in the form of a lamb, which stands for wisdom and justice. The followers of Vaikunda Swāmi even now hoist this *Anbu Kodi* in their *Nizhal Thankals*. They also conduct an annual procession carrying this flag, on 19th *Masi* (March), the Incarnation Day of Vaikunda Swāmi. Large numbers of people take part in this procession.

Vaikunda Swāmi was also interested in the welfare of the women. Even in the early half of the nineteenth century, Vaikunda Swāmi urged for their liberation from the oppression of the caste-ridden society. He encouraged the women to wear shoulder cloth and to carry their pot on their hip. The caste Hindus attacked the Nadar females, stripped their shoulder cloth, prevented them from carrying the pot on the hip and forced them to follow the age-old custom.⁴⁷ However, a few years after his death, the Nadar females staged a great revolt asking for their right to wear upper garments and secured the same in 1859.⁴⁸ Vaikundar set great store by the chastity of the womenfolk and requested his followers to protect their women.⁴⁹

The religious reforms were closely connected with social reform activities because in the early part of the nineteenth century, social re-

45. *Arulnāl*, p. 23.

46. B. Bala Prajāpathi, 'Vaikunda Swamigal Varalaru', *Malai Murasu* (Nellai Edition), 9th July 1978.

47. *Arulnāl*, p. 27.

48. On 26 July 1859, the Travancore Government issued a Royal proclamation abolishing all restrictions in the matter of using upper garments.

49. *Ahilam*, p. 209.

form was linked firmly with religious change.⁵⁰ Besides, in a State where religion was such a powerful force and even the kings themselves were slaves to the Brahmin priests, social reform was possible only in collaboration with the religion. But to achieve his objective he never attacked any religion and never attempted to set up any new religion like Buddhism or Jainism. However, with the coming of Vaikunda Swāmi, a new sect of Hinduism has appeared as a curious phenomenon in the state's religious history.⁵¹

As the first step of his religious reform, Vaikunda Swāmi raised his protest against the Brahminical temples. Immediately after his revelation at Tiruchendur, he preached against the Muruga temple of that town and openly criticized the Brahmins. He directed his people to give up all their religious ceremonies connected with the temple.⁵²

He severely condemned the religious practices of that period and asked his people to give up the meaningless rituals, elaborate rites and expensive ceremonies. He prevented his people from giving *Kānikkai* (offering), carrying *kāvadi* (a pole for the shoulder with ropes attached for carrying burdens or gifts to be given to temples), conducting *pūja* (ceremonial or ritual homage), taking *tibatūbam* (lights and frankincense) and celebrating car festival.⁵³ He also attacked ceremonies like *Ārathi* (the waving of lighted camphor, etc.) before the idol, *Āratu* (divine service and worship by lulling the idols of gods to sleep) and *tibārāthanai* (lamp of worship). Further, he criticized the institution of *devadāsi*, prevalent in the Brahminical temples.⁵⁴ He emphasized the importance of *dharma* for attaining salvation and he wanted to see god in the smiles of the poor. He proclaimed:

‘Those who help the poor are my people and
They will attain the place of the Eternal’.⁵⁵

50. A. R. Wadia, *History and Philosophy of Social Work in India*, (Bombay: 1961), p. 34.

51. Samuel Mateer, *Land of Charity*, p. 222.

52. *Ahilam*, p. 222.

53. *Ibid.*, pp. 222-223.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 227.

55. *Ibid.*, pp. 170-171.

Like other reformers of India in the nineteenth century, Vaikunda Swāmi condemned the worship of idols. Just at the time of his starting his reform movement the lower caste people were worshipping demons and their temples are commonly called *Pey-koils*. In these temples they raised a heap of earth in the shape of a pyramid and covered it with white wash and streaks of red-ochre. A stone or a small heap of earth serving as an altar.⁵⁶ Vaikunda Swami considered this kind of worship an uncivilized custom and strictly prohibited his followers from worshipping such pyramids and idols.⁵⁷ The lower caste people had staunch faith in the devil worship. They feared the devil gods and made offerings for appeasing them.⁵⁸ Vaikunda Swāmi attempted to free the people from the influence of the evil spirits. He declared that.

'There is no *Pisāsu* (evil spirit) no *Pilli* (witchcraft)
If you live as one in your thought'.⁵⁹

Vaikunda Swāmi severely castigated the practice of animal sacrifice. It was a period of superstitious beliefs and so the low caste people never offered prayers on proper form to their gods for blessings, and they attributed to their gods feelings of gentleness and compassion.⁶⁰ In order to prevent their evil influence and to secure their favour the people sacrificed animals and birds like goats, cocks and hens. Vaikunda Swāmi prevented animal sacrifice and making a libation of blood.⁶² His followers immediately stopped performing animal sacrifice.

Vaikunda Swāmi assumed the status of *Ayya* (Father) among his followers. His followers are generally called *Ayyāvzhi Makkal* (Followers of *Ayyā*). They believed that the worship of Vaikunda Swami is akin to that of the worship of the Supreme Being.⁶² The lower caste people were satisfied with the worship of their *Ayyā* and felt that there was no need to worship in the Brahminical temples. They had their

56. Gustav Oppert, *On the Original Inhabitants of Bharata Varṣa*, (Delhi : 1972), p. 572.

57. *Ahilam*, p. 170.

58. Samuel Mateer, *Land of Charity*, pp. 213-214.

59. *Ahilam*, p. 252.

60. W. H. Dutton, *Missions in India*, (London: 1854), p. 97.

61. *Ahilam*, p. 198.

62. *L. M. S. Report*, Santhapuram Mission District, 1864, p. 6.

own temples and mode of worship. In the temple of Samithope, they celebrated three festivals in a year in the Tamil months of Vaikasi, Avani and Thai. Each festival lasted eleven days, beginning with a flag hoisting ceremony and ending with a car festival. Throughout the festival days the worshippers engaged themselves in works of charity. There are five major *patis* or temples, namely Ambalappathi, Duvarahapathi, Muttappathi, Vagippathi and Mulappathi.

In these temples also the worshippers of *Ayya* conducted festivals twice or thrice in a year. Occasional festivals were celebrated in the *Nizhals Thankals* also. Their worship consisted in nothing but doing *dharma* in the name of *Ayyā*.⁶³

Vaikunda Swāmi's reform movement opposed the work of the Christian missionaries. The missionaries argued that the doctrines of Vaikunda Swāmi had a slight tinge of the Christian elements.⁶⁴ They vehemently criticized the work of Vaikunda Swāmi. In their annual reports they wrote: "Formerly they were ignorant of the doctrine of the resurrection, but now they say that Muthukkutti (Vaikunda Swāmi) will come again, raise his followers from the dead and take them to the heaven of the worshippers of Vishnu."⁶⁵ This is not true. Vaikunda Swami, in his doctrines, preached about the *dharmayuga*. He said that in *dharmayuga* that there be 'only one religion and only one caste for all'.⁶⁶ In the *dharmayuga* there would be no crimes or vices in the people. He also said that there would be only one ruler over all people in *dharmayuga*.⁶⁷ He assured the people that *dharmayuga* would come very soon.⁶⁸ Through this concept, Vaikunda Swāmi kindled the spirit of *dharma* in the people and organized a society on the principle of one Ruler, one Religion and one Caste. The missionaries considered him to be a bitter enemy of Christianity.⁶⁹ One missionary reported: "In 1821 there were upwards of 1200 converts in these places (Nagercoil Mission District). It seemed as if the whole population would be brought under the influence of the cross. But a terrible check was given to our operations by the rise of Muthukkuttiyison. This

63. Interview with M. Paramasiva Tevar and K. Vanniya Nambiyar, Tirunelveli, 30 May 1980.

64. Samuel Mateer, *Land of Charity*, p. 222.

65. *L. M. S. Report*, Nagercoil Mission District, 1864, p. 4.

66. *Ahilam*, p. 146.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

69. *L. M. S. Report*, Santhapuram Mission District, 1886, p. 6.

cunning contrivance of satan has much impeded our progress in these parts . . .”⁷⁰ Further the Jamestown Mission Report for 1863 records: “It is no time for any of us to sleep, for the enemy is at least as busy as God’s people are.”⁷¹ Thus Vaikunda Swāmi’s reform movement proved a powerful check to the spread of Christianity in the southern part of India.

Vaikunda Swāmi paved the way for the reform movement of Sri Narayana Guru, a social reformer of Ezhava Community in Kerala. A comparative study of Vaikunda Swami’s teaching and work, and that of Narayana Guru, reveals that Vaikunda Swāmi was a fore-runner to the reform activities of Sri Narayana Guru. During the period of the rapid growth of the sect of Vaikunda Swami, Narayana Guru led his ascetic life in Marunthuvalmalai, near Samithope. Like Vaikunda Swāmi, Guru opposed the caste system, emphasized Truth, Charity, Love and Mercy and stood for ‘One Caste, One Religion and One God’.

Vaikunda Swāmi continued his reform activities till the end of his life. Towards the end, he fell ill and died on Monday 3 June 1851 at the age of forty-three. As his parting advice, he appealed to his followers to live in unity, fearlessness and good faith.⁷² At his burial place at Samithope a temple was consecrated to the sacred memory of Vaikunda Swāmi. At present thousands of devotees visit this temple and it has become one of the important pilgrim centres in South India. His reforms produced far-reaching changes in the life of the non-caste Hindus. His revolutionary ideas bore fruit immediately after his death through the ‘upper-cloth’ rebellion of the Nadars. The followers of the temple-entry movements were also emboldened by his teachings. There were temple-entry agitations in Madurai, Sivakasi, Kamudi, Tiruchendur, Srivilliputtur and other places in Tamil Nadu and, finally, this right was secured through much bloodshed. The social reformers of South India like St Ramalinga, Sri Narayana Guru, Veeresalingam and Periyar E.V.R. were also indirectly influenced by the teachings of Vaikunda Swāmi. Thus he became the morning-star of the social reform movement in South India and left an everlasting influence on the socio-religious life of South India.

70. *Ibid.*, Nagercoil Mission District, 1884, pp. 24-25.

71. *Ibid.*, James Town Mission, District, 1893, p. 4.

72. *Ahilam*, p. 344.