

SREE NARAYANA GURU MISSION OF THE UK A Short History

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There were very few Malayalees in England up to the latter half of the sixties. The majority of these Malayalees had come here for the purpose of higher studies. The end of the sixties saw the immigration of a number of Malayalees who had been working in Singapore. After working for years under the British Government in Singapore, they decided to come here, after accepting the British citizenship. The vast majority had families in Kerala and their aim was to work here for a while, save money and ultimately return home.

By the middle of the seventies, many of them started bringing their families here. Only very few had their own places of residence, as they were not keen on investing money on property here. With the arrival of their families, accommodation became a real issue and hence many started buying houses of their own. The majority still dreamt of returning to their native land, one day.

During these years, although many organisations sprung up among Malayalees, none of them were very active. As mentioned, it was towards the end of the seventies, that the number of Malayalees here rapidly increased. At this time people started realising that, for the younger generation who had been born and brought up here, to go back and adjust to life in their homeland was going to be extremely difficult.

Some of the Malayalees here, had been wanting to celebrate the birthday of Sree Narayana Guru in London, for many years. Most of them had been responsible for establishing the Sree Narayana Mission in Singapore. About this time a group of people (Mr V. Vasudevan, Mr P. Bhaskaran, Mr N. Parameswarann Pillai, Mr M Vidhyadharan, Mr S Sakhthidharan, Mr S. Suresh, Mr S. Sugathan, Mr P Madhusudhanan, Mr. V. Gopinathan (Croydon), Mr. Sreedharan (Croydon), Mr.R. Bhaskaran (Southall), Mr. K. Janardhanan (Southall)) under the leadership of Mr V K Narayanan called together a meeting of Sree Narayana Guru devotees on the 22nd of October 1978 at Trinity Church Hall, East Avenue, London E12.

At the meeting, which was chaired by Mr K T V Sreedharan, it was decided not only to celebrate yearly the birthday of the Guru but also to organise an association in the name of the Guru and establish a centre for its working. It was decided to name the organisation, Sree Narayana Mission of the UK, and a temporary Executive Committee of twenty one members was formulated, as follows:- President - Mr K.T.V Sreedharan, Vice President - Mr N. Antony, General Secretary - Mr K. Ravindran, Assistant Secretaries - Mr N.P Pillai and Mr N. Sudevan, Treasurer- Mr V.K.Narayanan, Committee Members -Mr V. Gopinathan, Mr K. N. Azhakesan, Mr L Netto. Mr N Antony, Mr R. Surendran, Mr V S Chellappan, Mr P Madusudanan, Mr J. Raveendran Pillai, Mr M. Sadasivan, Mr K Purushothaman, Mr. K. Gopinathan, Mr N. Brahmanandan, Mr K. Janardhanan, Mr K.S. Das and Mr V.Muraleedharan.. Auditors - Mr K. Natarajan and Mr S. Thankappan.

From then on matters progressed rapidly and within the short span of five months, the Sree Narayana mission was established with three hundred and twenty six members, of who five were life members. The first general body meeting was held on 14 April 1979, which approved the constitution of the mission and also amended the name to Sree Narayana

Guru Mission Of the UK as suggested by Guru Nitya Chaithanya Yati. Along with that a building subcommittee was elected with the aim of establishing a permanent centre. The same year also saw the first ever celebration of the birthday of Sree Narayana Guru at East Ham Town Hall in London on September 15, which is also known as 'Chathayam'. This was the 125th birth anniversary of the guru and was attended by people of all religions. The celebration lasted 7 1/2 hours and included an 'All Religion Conference' in addition to various arts programmes. This organisation had definite and clear cut aims from the very beginning, which were to spread the gospel of the Guru, among the people of Britain first and then worldwide. They also aimed to make the organisation which would rise above the barriers of religion, caste, creed etc. and to put the ideals of the Guru into practice through charitable activities.

Let us take a look into the various activities of the organisation. In 1980, the mission was registered as a charitable organisation. The same year, a souvenir comprising many articles on the Guru was published in association with the 'Chathayam' celebration and then was continued yearly. Realising that if the ideals of the Guru were to be spread in this country, the medium of the universities was indispensable, The Mission established contact with London and Manchester universities. The then Head of Comparative religious Studies of Manchester University, Professor Ling spoke at length on the subject "Sree Narayana Guru and Buddhism" on Chathayam day in 1980. Reverend Dr George Karakunnel, who had come from Kerala, wrote a thesis on Sree Narayana Guru entitled "Vedanti and a Social Reformer" with assistance from the mission for which London University conferred upon him the degree of Master of theology. A copy of the thesis was given to the mission. Numerous books on the Guru were collected and a library established. In 1980 it was decided to establish a Federation - FONG - with the purpose of co-ordinating various organisations working world-wide, in the name of the Guru. In 1981 greeting cards with the Guru's portrait were printed and distributed. The same year, Christmas was celebrated by the mission and this has been continued up to the present day.

In 1981, the then Indian High Commissioner in the UK. - Dr .V.A.Sayed Muhammed, became the patron of the Sree Narayana Guru Mission. The same year Guru Nitya Chaithanya Yati visited London and spoke on various occasions.

The year 1983 was a turning point in the history of the mission. The members realised that, it would be good if people could meet once a month with the idea of conducting prayers, listening to talks about the Guru, teaching the younger generation about his teachings and also as a means of social contact. With this idea in mind, on Sunday the sixth of March 1983, a prayer meeting was held between 3 and 6 pm and this trend has been continued since without a break, on the first Sunday of every month. Each family takes turns to undertake the financial responsibility of conducting such a meeting.

In 1983, it was also decided to establish a foundation fund, to meet the expenses of conducting charitable activities in the name of the Guru. The Mission was also affiliated to such other organisations as the Newham Voluntary Agencies Council, the Newham Council for Racial Equality etc.

Mission participated in the month long Golden Jubilee celebrations of Sivagiri Pilgrimage held at Sivagiri in December 1983 by attending the Global Meeting of leaders of Sree

Narayana Organisations, chaired by the late Mr V R Krishna Ayyar, retired Supreme Court Judge and a minister in the first Kerala Assembly. Mr V Muraleedharan, our then Assistant Secretary, delivered a speech about the Mission and its aspiration to establish a centre in the UK during this seminar.

From 1985 onwards the books in the library were brought to the prayer meetings and as a result, more and more people started reading them. The same year as part of the prayer meetings, an Advice Service was set up to help solve many of the problems experienced by the members. From 1988 onwards, the death anniversary of the Guru was also observed yearly.

Guru Nitya Chaithanya Yati, Muni Narayana Prasad and Swami Saswathikananda from Sivagiri visited London on various occasions over the years and gave talks. Over the years, The Mission was able to obtain grants from Newham Council and as a result we were able to buy a computer, television, video recorder, photo-copier, musical instruments, a sound system, books, office furniture etc.

The above activities in themselves were sufficient to keep the Committee members occupied. However to state that efforts towards establishing a centre for the mission took up about 90% of the time of the committee members over the a period of sixteen years would not be an exaggeration. This was only too true as the next paragraphs will show.

The price of properties were going up day by day and as result it was decided that something had to be done quickly. The Newham Council was contacted and informed of the fact that numerous Malayalees were residing in the Borough and they were also informed of the activities of the mission. During this time, the dream of owning a building was becoming a reality and the fund collection commenced. In March 1981 the total amount pledged was £12000. We enquired whether the Newham Council would be able to help us financially. The advice from the council was that instead of trying for a grant, it would be better to buy a building and then to try for a financial grant for its renovation. Collecting funds was no easy task and by the end of March 1983, in spite of the untiring efforts of the members only £9,171 was collected. It was at this function that it was heard through Newham Council that there was a building for sale in Howards Road, Plaistow. As it was an old building, the price was only £7,250. An emergency General Body Meeting convened and it was decided to buy the building, taking into account the daily increasing prices and also with the idea that it could be sold later on, if it was not found suitable. This decision was later on to result in a lot of hardship and sorrow but of course no one could foresee it at that time. Thus on the 10th January 1983, the building in 30 Howards Road became the property of the mission.

With the help of the Newham Council, we then tried for a grant from the GLC, but to no avail. Perceiving the magnitude of the problem, the Newham Council permitted an emergency grant of £9,404 for erecting a fence and repairing the roof. Thus, on the seventh November 1983, the above work began in earnest after obtaining planning permission. However there was great difficulty in completing it due to vandalism, and it was finally accomplished, only by the provision of twenty four hour security. While the above activities were going on, we applied for a grant under Urban aid from the government with the help of the Newham Council. Meanwhile, collection of funds was also going on. By March 1985 the total amount collected rose to £12,592. We then heard that £36000 was permitted from Urban Aid in April

1985, but the official letter from Newham Council was received only in August. As soon as this was obtained, the architect firm Slater & Hicklings was entrusted with the work responsibility. The work was put out to tender and £44,000 was the lowest tender. By this time, the building was insured for £80,000.

Though the contractor was ready to commence work in March 1986, it was not possible, as the legal agreement of the grant was not yet ready. It was obtained only in September 1986 by which time the tender had risen by 12%. So the work had to be put out for tender again, but this time luck was on our side, as the tender was £42,500. Thus on the 6th of October 1986, Idecon Limited started work.

At this time, it was realised that apart from the grant, about £23,000 had to be raised to meet all the expenses. The building fund collection was renewed and finally on 20 March 1987, the building was completed and insured for £100,000. Thus, after the untiring efforts of eight and a half years, a proper centre was at last established for the mission in London. While the above renovations were going on, there had been isolated acts of vandalism which were duly reported to the police, and Newham Council.

The fact that such a long time was needed to establish a centre was due to financial problems rather than the lethargy of members. Even after six years, only £18,990.48 was collected. On the fourth of May 1987 at 1430, an Annual General Body meeting was held in the new building. This was an unforgettable moment which gave immense satisfaction and happiness to all those who had worked relentlessly for this.

However this happiness did not last long. On 12 May 1987, around midnight I received a phone call from the police with the devastating news that the building was on fire. The trials and tribulations of eight and a half years had been reduced to ashes within moments. The only consolation was that the building was insured.

Without losing any time we obtained permission from the insurance company to commence repair work, but the repair had to be stopped, due to repeated vandalism. A detailed report, showing all the acts of vandalism committed against the building was prepared and copies sent to as many councillors as possible. As a result, Councillor Ray Massey convened a meeting with the Mission, the Grant unit and the Race Equality unit to discuss a possible solution. The Grant Unit informed us that the Government policy was that, if we sold the building, we would have to return the grant of £36000 and then re-apply for a grant on buying a new building. However, taking the special situation into account, they said that we could appeal for an amendment of that policy. Months passed and no results were forthcoming. Finally with the help of council leader Fred Jones, permission was obtained to sell the building without returning the grant. On 4 October, 1988. we then received the heart-warming news that the Newham council would grant us £150,000 to buy another building, with the stipulation that the money would be utilised by 31 March 1989.

The matter of purchasing a new building was no easy task and meanwhile the building in 30 Howard Road was sold for £80,000 on 16 May 1989. We then applied for and obtained a year's extension of the grant.

On 8 September 1989, a three storied building in 16 Barking Road, London, E6 was purchased. The cost of the new building was £200,000 and a further £100,000 would be

necessary for its renovation. A plan was prepared by the architects and approval was obtained from Newham Council. Specifications were prepared and the work put out for tender. The lowest tender was £149,424 with 15% VAT and 10% architect fees making a total of £186,761. Approximately £50,000 was in the bank left over from the sale of the old building. This meant that we had to obtain £137,000 by the time the renovation was complete. This was a shock to many of our members as we had only managed to obtain £20,485 in the past ten years. In the light of this, collecting the above amount within the space of a few months seemed impossible. Many personally told me that our efforts were doomed to fail. Against all odds we decided to persevere. On 15th April 1991, Bowden and Willis contractors started work. Due to financial problems the work was done in stages. For the next one year we collected funds every Sunday, not taking into account any personal inconvenience. By 31 March 1992 the pledged amount increased to £68,000 and out of this £33,502 was collected. Considering that it took ten years to obtain £20,485, collecting the above amount over a period of fifteen months was a great achievement. This reflected the sincerity and generosity of the members and well-wishers and also the dedication of the committee members.

We explored many other routes. We obtained donations not only from different parts of England, but also from countries like the U.S.A. Nigeria, U.A.E Ireland, and India.

The initial contract of all essential works was scheduled to be completed by June 1992 and we calculated that we were short of £40,000. We applied to many trusts, with no joy. At this crucial point, we obtained a favourable response from the Tudor Trust. We contacted them and showed them our efforts and also explained the aims and aspirations of our organisation. Accordingly we received a letter from them stating that a grant of £40,000 had been allowed. There was great rejoicing as this obviated the need for a bank loan and from then on things speeded up. By September 1992 the initial phase was over. The remaining work was again put out for tender and was completed by EBS contractors in April 1993. This was achieved by an interest free loan of £15,000 given to us by 18 members. By March 31, 1993, £62,485 was the total amount collected in the building fund.

Once these were settled only then could we begin thinking about the inauguration and our future plans, as up to this point the fund collection did not allow for breathing space. It was decided to conduct the inauguration in an elaborate manner and to publish a souvenir in connection with it. However, as soon as the building was completed, many of the members wanted to start using it straightaway. As a compromise on 27 June 1993 at 8:00am, Sree Narayana Guru's portrait was unveiled by two members, Mr K Somarajan and Mr N Gangadharan. A prayer was conducted and from that day onwards the building has been open daily from 17:30 to 19:30 for prayers. In addition, the prayer meetings on the first Sunday of every month also continued without fail. It was decided that all other activities would commence only after the official inauguration. The inaugural function was fixed for Sunday the 3rd of July 1994.

The inauguration ceremony was conducted by Swami Muni Narayana Prasad of Narayana Gurukula, Varkala and Swami Saswathikanada of Sivagiri Mutt, Varkala jointly lighting the lamp and Honourable Stephen Timms MP unveiling a plaque at the Mission Centre. The celebrations lasted 8 days with public meetings, interfaith seminars and cultural programmes. Special guests included His Excellency Dr L M Singhvi, Our Patron and Indian

High Commissioner to UK, Dr K K Damodaran, President of Sree Narayana Mandira Samithi, Bombay and Mr. Rajendran, President of Sree Narayana Samithi, Bangalore.

A Special souvenir consisting of 178 pages were released on the occasion. Kerala Kaumudi, a daily newspaper published a 2 page supplement to congratulate our achievements.

The building project was led by Mr K Ravindran until 1984 and by Mr V Muraleedharan from then on until the completion and inauguration in 1994.

After the inauguration services such as Day Centre for elderly, Free Malayalam classes, Pilot Supplementary Education, 2 day European trip, formation Sports Group, Arts Group, Womens Group, Children's Christmas party, New Year's Eve celebration, publication of Newsletters etc were implemented. Monthly prayer meetings commenced in Croydon. Also held 2 fund raising performances of a play 'Njayarum Njayavum' , first ever play based on the lives of Malayalees in London written by V Muraleedharan.

The period between 1997 and 2001 saw significant expansion of the services already implemented as well as new ones being implemented. A Strategy document was produced covering short and long-term strategies, Sub-committee structure reviewed and re-structured with clear roles and responsibilities, simple but effective Election Procedure drafted and approved by the AGM, Education Centre significantly expanded to cover up to A level with highly qualified and experienced teachers, Commenced Education Centre in Croydon, Newsletter expanded and re-named "The Mission Times" and published quarterly, Annual European trips lasting 7 days conducted earning praise from participants, Launched Sree Narayana Guru Childcare Centre and successfully run during Summer vacations earning praise from Newham Council, Launched Sree Narayana Guru Helpline providing help and advice to the needy, Improved monthly prayer by inviting expert speakers on various subjects, presenting summary of news from UK and Kerala, teaching children about Guru and encouraging children to make speech and show artistic talents etc. Launched Sree Narayana Guru Arts Centre and produced plays, encouraged Women and children to participate and participated in Drama competitions. Successfully launched an annual vegetarian Food Tasting event with prizes given to the top 3 items based on voting by the public.

Guru Dharma propagation activities were given high profile; brought Swami Muni Narayana Prasad of Narayana Gurukula, Varkala. Swami conducted daily classes, attended a major external event and delivered an excellent speech about the Guru. Swami also wrote a paragraph about every written work of the Guru which were serially published in "The Mission Times". A website for Mission was created and published. A paper was presented by Mr V. Muraleedharan about the Guru at a meeting in Oxford, chaired by Dr Flether, head of External Affairs department at Oxford University.

Mission participated in the 1st Sree Narayana World convention organised by the World Council in New York in 1999. The then president delivered Mr V Muraleedharan delivered a speech at the opening ceremony as well as speaking in a Youth Seminar.

Mr V. Muraleedharan, Mr VK Narayanan, Mr K Ravindran and Mr KC Asok Kumar were given awards for their services to the Sree Narayana Guru Mission of the UK.

Quarterly prayer meetings were started in Southall in 2002 (Please check this)

The Silver Jubilee celebration of the Guru Mission was conducted on a phased basis with an opening ceremony on the 11th of April 2004 and a closing ceremony on the 10th of October 2004.

The Jubilee celebration was began on the Sunday, 11th April 2004 at the Mission Centre with a prayer followed by the flag hoisting ceremony by Mr VK Narayanan, the key founder member of the SNGM of the UK. The prayer was conducted by the Swami Sukshmananda of Sivagiri, Swami Bodhi Theertha and Prof. Prabhavathi of Gurukulam. Prior to the cultural programmes at East Ham Town Hall at 3.30pm an Inter-faith walk for world peace was conducted, from the Guru Mission Centre to East Ham Town Hall on Sunday 11th of April 2004 at 2pm.

Mission's patron Hon. MP Mr Stephen Timms, Deputy Major Mr Desai and many guests from abroad e.g. Swami Sukshmananda (Sivagiri), Swami Bodhi Theertha (Gurukulam), Prof. Prabhavathi (Gurukulam) and Mr Aravindakshan (USA) took part. When the peace walkers arrived at the Town Hall, "Thalapoli reception" welcomed the peace walkers to the cultural programme.

Followed by the cultural event at Town Hall Inter-faith Seminars were conducted at our three centres, East Ham, Croydon and Southall. Many other Arts & cultural events were conducted as a part of celebration in deferent dates and the Silver Jubilee Celebration ends on 10th October 2004 evening with a grand closing ceremony programme at Town Hall, East Ham. Guru's Statue was installed in the prayer room on 10th September 2006.

In 2009 a leaflet was released to officially launch the Croydon Building project to obtain a building for our Croydon Centre.