

Vaikom Satyagraha: India's non-violent freedom movement

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Abstract:

Vaikom Satyagraha (1924-25) was a Satyagrah in Travancore, Kerala in India against untouchability in Hindu society. The movement was centred at the Shiva temple at Vaikom near Kottayam. The Vaikom Satyagraha was the first systematically organised agitation in Kerala against orthodoxy to secure the rights of the depressed classes. As was the custom prevalent in those days, the avarnas were not allowed to enter the temples. But at Vaikom, they were not permitted even the use of the public roads around the temple. Notice boards were put up at different spots prohibiting the entry of avarnas reminding them of their social inferiority. Sree Narayana Guru, who had never shown any interest in the activities at the Indian National Congress, involved himself with the Vaikom Satyagraha and extended much co-operation. There was another crucial incident, which triggered the action. Sree Narayana Guru himself was prohibited from passing through the roads around the temple.

keywords : Vaikom,satyagraha,depressed class,Indian Nation Congress,Sree Narayana Guru.

Full Paper:

Vaikom Satyagraha (1924-25) was a Satyagrah in Travancore, Kerala in India against untouchability in Hindu society. The movement was centred at the Shiva temple at Vaikom near Kottayam. The Satyagraha aimed at securing freedom of movement for all sections of society through the public roads leading to the Sree Mahadeva temple at Vaikom.¹The Vaikom Satyagraha was the first systematically organised agitation in Kerala against orthodoxy to secure the rights of the depressed classes. For the first time in history, the agitation brought forward the question of civil rights of the low-caste people into the forefront of Indian politics. No mass agitation in Kerala acquired so much all-India attention and significance in the 20th

century as the Vaikom Satyagraha. Vaikom is a small temple town in central Travancore on the eastern banks of the backwaters of Vembanad Lake. The town is famous for its Shiva temple, which in the early 20th century was the citadel of orthodoxy and casteism. As was the custom prevalent in those days, the avarnas were not allowed to enter the temples. But at Vaikom, they were not permitted even the use the public roads around the temple. Notice boards were put up at different spots prohibiting the entry of avarnas reminding them of their social inferiority. All the more up bearable to them were the fact that a Christian or a Muslim was freely allowed on these road. An avarna had to walk through a circuitous route, two or three miles longer to avoid the road besides the temple. It seems that when Ayyankali, a Dalit leader an member of pulaya cast,² had to travel through this road he was asked to get down from his bullock cart and walk through the circuitous route and his bullock cart without him was allowed to pass through the road.

Released from prison in February, Gandhi involved himself in the satyagraha on the urgings of, among others, the Ezhava leader, T K Madhavan, and a Nair teacher associated with the newly started *Mathrubhumi*, K Kelappan. Both Madhavan and Kelappan were part of an anti-untouchability committee formed in Vaikom. Arrests of local leaders and frequent exhaustion of funds tested morale, but did not break it. In November 1924, large numbers of Hindus in the Malayalam country marched towards Thiruvananthapuram in two converging processions. One, going southward, proceeded from Vaikom, and the other, going north, from Kottar. Both marches maintained perfect discipline. In Thiruvananthapuram, twelve of the marchers presented to the Maharani regent a mammoth petition, signed by more than 25,000 persons, for opening Vaikom's temple roads to all.

Unprecedentedly, many Namubudiris and Nairs had joined the march from Vaikom, in organising which a major role was played by Mannath Padmanabhan, founder, ten years earlier, of the Nair Service Society. Welcomed on their route by Ezhava women, the marchers ate rice offered by 'untouchable' Pulayas and called, in his ashram, on the venerated Narayana Guru, who blessed their bid. He had visited the satyagrahis's camp a month earlier, made a handsome donation, and apparently offered to be a satyagrahi himself. In March 1925, Gandhi arrived in Vaikom, held public meetings, bolstered the satyagrahis, met the Maharani regent, and confronted the head of the Nambudiri priests in a three-hour conversation. Before journeying to Vaikom he had written in *Young India* (19 Feb 1925): 'The Vykom satyagrahis are fighting a

battle of no less consequence than that of Swaraj'. Having touched several 'untouchable' satyagrahis following his arrival, Gandhi had become polluted. Thus reckoning, the chief priest kept himself at a safe distance throughout the long conversation. The story would endure in the Malayalam country.

On 12 March, accompanied by two southern allies, EVR (*E V Ramaswamy Naicker*) and CR (*C Rajagopalachari*), Gandhi called on Narayana Guru who reiterated his endorsement of the satyagraha. Towards the end of Gandhi's nine-day visit, the princely authorities climbed down, yet it was only months later, in November 1925, that all, including Ezhavas and the 'untouchables', were able to walk on the temple roads. Only on three of them, that is. The fourth road was made a 'Brahmins only' path from which Christians and Muslims too were excluded. Destined to be venerated himself as the rationalist Periyar, EVR played a significant role in the satyagraha and suffered imprisonment for it. In November 1925, he presided at a large public assembly in Vaikom where the struggle's participants and supporters accepted the terms that Gandhi's visit had secured. Future critics would call the terms inadequate, but the response at the time was of joy and triumph. A year earlier, Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, thirty-three at the time, called the Vaikom satyagraha 'the most important event' for the country's 'untouchables'. In 1936, eleven years after the 'three-fourth' victory, Travancore's ruling family would open all its temples, and the roads leading up to them, to all Hindus. In the Malayalam country, Vaikom helped the freedom and social justice movements to join hands. Elsewhere in India, the news from Vaikom confronted insulated caste Hindus with the ugly realities of untouchability and unapproachability. There was another consequence. Since the Vaikom struggle took place in the territory of Travancore, 'the princely states were helped onto the map of the national freedom struggle'.

Sree Narayana Guru (1855-1928)-also known as Narayana Guru Swami was a Hindu saint and social reformer of India. The Guru was born into an Ezhava family. In an era when people from backward communities like the Ezhavas faced much social injustices in the cast-ridden Kerala society. Guru Devan, as he was fondly known to his followers, led reform movement in Kerala revolted against casteism and worked on propagating new values of freedom in spirituality and of social equality.³ Sree Narayana Guru, who had never shown any interest in the activities at the Indian National Congress, involved himself with the Vaikom Satyagraha and extended much co-operation. The reason is quite evident. The Vaikom Satyagraha was not

an agitation for political freedom, it was a movement to purify the Hindu society of its blemishes, and this was not Guru also attempted through his action and message. But somehow, a small misunderstanding arose between Mahatma Gandhi and Sree Narayana Guru, regarding the modus operandi of Satyagraha. One of Gurus dialogues with the general secretary of the Indian National Congress were misinterpreted in such a way that it led to believe that ideals of Gandhi and Guru clashed. There was a stage when some suggested to Gandhi to withdraw the support for the Satyagraha because the spiritual leader of the Thiyyas was urging his followers to use violence, which is against the principals of Satyagraha.⁴

About two hundred years ago at Vaikom, there was an attempt at temple entry and a gruesome end to it. Balarama Varma was the king of Travancore and Kunchukutti Pillai was the Diwan (Dalawa). About two hundred Ezhava young men, in and around Vaikom decided to enter the temple and worship. A date was fixed. Those who were in charge of the temple carried the news to the king and the authorities and the king promised to take necessary action. On the day of the proposed temple entry one messenger from the king came to Vaikom,⁵ and met the temple authorities. They wondered how this single man would stop 200 able-bodied young men. The young men organized themselves in to a procession from Iruvelikkunnu on Kottayam Road. Their plan was to enter the temple from the eastern road. As they were nearing the temple the King's messenger along with a large number of armed personnel's started attacking the unarmed civilians. The dead bodies were collected and buried in the pond at the north eastern side of the temple. It seems *Dalawa Kunchukutti Pillai* had ordered the massacre; hence the pond came to be known as *Dalawa Kulam*⁶. The pond is no longer there. It is filled in and the present private bus stand is constructed there.

Ezhavas first took up issue in 1905. The Ezhava representatives in the Travancore Legislature (Kochu Kunjan Channar, Kunju Panicker and Kumaran Asan) raised the question of use of the public the roads around the temples by avarnas.⁷ The authorities remained adamant and refused to take up the matter even for discussion as it was considered a religious question. In 1920-21, representative Asan sect also raised the question and it was decided to shift the notice boards a little, so that some parts of the roads would be accessible to the avarnas.

T. K. Madhavan, the organizing secretary of the SNDP, became a member of the Travancore Legislature, and felt that Asan and the others have accepted a humiliating compromise. Madhavan wanted to demand outright temple entry, but he was denied permission to even introduce the resolution in the Legislature⁸. Madhavan met the then Divan Raghaviah at his residence and requested him to reconsider his decision. The Divan refused; Madhavan then requested for permission to make a representation to the Maharaja himself which was denied.⁹ Frustrated and enraged, Madhavan raised his voice of protest before the Divan, proclaiming .We are denied the right to present our problems to the legislatures, and we are denied permission to represent to the Maharaja. How are we to resolve our problems? Are we to leave Travancore? The Divan retorted, you may leave Travancore to solve your problems.¹⁰

The news of the decision reached far and wide. It evoked mixed reactions. The caste Hindus who tolerated the speeches at the meeting could not digest the idea of a procession as proposed by the KPCC and the UAC.¹² They along with the local Magistrate, the Police Inspector, and the Tahasildar, met the congress leaders at their camp, and suggested a postponement. They promised that they would try to prevent communal tensions, and make the procession a success, if they were given time. The congress also realized the situation. They could also make use of the time to plan and prepare properly for launching the agitation. The date was fixed as 30 March 1924,¹³ and the idea was to take out a procession. Meanwhile, the local Magistrate fearing communal tensions issued prohibition orders against the procession. Hence the UAC changed its tactics. It was decided to send only three volunteers every day instead of a procession. Volunteers were selected from all castes.

A Satyagraha Ashram was set up about one furlong south of the temple. The Ashram was packed with volunteers who came from different parts of the *Ezhavas and other* mentions this in the golden Jubilee Souvenir of Neyyattinkara S N D P Union.¹¹ The editorial of the Malayala Manorama on 29 March 1924 (the day before the starting of the Satyagraha) mentions, *If a venerable sage like Sree Narayana Guru and his disciple Mahakavi Kumaran Asan were driven away from the road around the temple by a drunken upper caste buffoon in the name of caste, can their people take it lying down?¹⁴ If they rise up in revolt can*

any authority stop them by force low castes are prohibited through this road country? The venue of Satyagraha was decided to be on the western road where a prohibitory board announced:

There was another crucial incident, which triggered the action. Sree Narayana Guru himself was prohibited from passing through the roads around the temple. Sri Bhargavan Vaidyar E. V. Ramasami Naicker (affectionately called Periyar by the Tamilians)¹⁵ came with his wife Nagamma and a group of followers and offered Satyagraha on April 14. As the head of the *Satyagraha*, Periyar was imprisoned twice. Gandhi, who was also present on the Vaikom scene, was disturbed about the whole affair but seemingly unable to stop it. His concern grew when other religious groups became involved. Thus the Sikh community offered to meet expenses. Money was also said to have come in from Burma, Singapore, and Malaysia, from non-Brahmin immigrants, Muslims and Christians. Gandhi tried under the circumstances to keep the whole thing an inter-Hindu affair¹⁶. However, in the end a compromise was reached. The streets in the temple area were opened to *Harijans* or *Untouchables*. In 1936, they were allowed to enter the temple. The *Satyagraha* paved the way for subsequent Temple Entry Act.

Vaikom had been chosen as a place for *Satyagraha* organized by the heads of the Congress Party. Periyar who was touring Madurai district received "a private letter" asking him to join in the *Satyagrah*¹⁷. He immediately proceeded to Vaikom where he violated the order not to address public meetings and was imprisoned for one month. a light punishment on order of the Raja. Gandhi became more and more troubled as the *Satyagraha* took a turn of communal riot because of conversions to Islam taking place¹⁸. Vain efforts were made to return Periyar to Madras state. After his first release from prison Periyar was advised to stay away from Vaikom which he did not do. His second imprisonment was more severe, six months in the Central Jail Trivandrum. Meanwhile Nakammai, Periyar's first wife, organized women's campaigning

On November 13, 1924, a delegation headed by *Changanasseri Parameswaran Pillai* waited on the Regent Maharani Sethu Lakshmi Bayi and submitted a memorandum signed by more than 25,000 Savarnas, *We the undersigned members of the deputation, loyally and respectfully beg leave to approach your Gracious Highness with the humble prayer that the roads around the Vaikom temple walls, and all other*

*roads similarly situated in other parts of the State may be thrown open to all classes of Your Gracious Highness' subjects, without distinction of caste or creed.*¹⁹

Conclusion : Though the memorandum was submitted with much optimism, reaction was not that favourable. The Maharani expressed that the issue had to be decided in the legislature. The resolution was moved in the legislature on February 7, 1925, by the then SNDP Secretary N. Kumaran (Later he became High Court Judge). The text of the resolution was *all roads around the temple at Vaikom, and similar roads all over the state of Travancore must be open for travelling for people of all castes and creeds .The resolution was defeated by 22 votes against 21. (It is understood that Dr. Palpu's brother who was expecting favours from the Government voted against the resolution. He was a close associate of the Narayana Guru at Aruvippuram, but he turned Judas. He was haunted by the community and he fled from places to place to save his life. He became a social outcaste and met with an ignoble death.* The defeat of the resolution severely affected the morale of the Satyagrahis and boosted the high-handedness of the Orthodox Hindus. While Gandhiji tried to lift the sinking morale through exhortations to remain patient and peaceful, Indanthuruthil Namboothiri, the leader of orthodoxy, arranged for hirelings to beat up the Satyagrahis . They were thrown into neck deep waters. Lime mixed with other strong irritants was poured in to their eyes. The police stood silently watching as they were secretly instructed not to interfere. Gandhiji wrote in Young India, *the Travancore authorities may, however, be respectfully told that Congress cannot watch barbarity with indifference. The letting loose of the goodness on the devoted heads of the Satyagrahis, is bound to gather the Satyagrahis, the full weight of all-India public opinion. Another achievement of Vaikom agitation is certainly communal harmony. Progressive minded Savarnas and Avarnas came together with Christians, Muslims and even Sikhs. It is to be remembered that many Savarnas played the role of active leaders, till the withdrawal of the Satyagraha, and this has demonstrated the basic unity of the people. Above all, the Vaikom Satyagraha was a testing ground for the Gandhian principles of Satyagraha. It was tested and proved as the most effective means for the first time.*

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