

# ROLE OF MANNATHU PADMANABHAN IN GURUVAYOOR SATYAGRAHA (1931-32)

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## ABSTRACT

Mannathu Padmanabhan, a multi-faceted personality, was primarily a social reformer, involved in politics. This enabled him to bring forth many changes in Travancore society. Gandhian ideology was something that attracted him very much. Mannathu was one of the first leaders who heard Mahatma Gandhiji's call for the eradication of untouchability, and he led the 'Savarnajatha' from Guruvayoor to Trivandrum. He also took part in Guruvayoor and Vaikom Satyagraha. He made it possible for Harijans to enter the Devi temple at Perunna which was his family deity temple, and was done long before the temple entry proclamation. Due to his efforts, Guruvayoor temple was opened to all avarnas after the temple entry movement. His activities in the Guruvayoor Satyagraha are ever remembered by the people of India, particularly by the low caste Hindus of Kerala.

*Keywords: Mannathu Padmanabhan, Guruvayoor Satyagraha and Savarnajatha*

## Introduction

The great social reformers of Kerala during the 20<sup>th</sup> century were Chattampi Swamikal, Sri Narayana Guru and Ayyankali. The last among them was Sri Mannathu Padmanabhan. As a leader, writer and a social reformer, he was very famous in Kerala. His original name was Padmanabhan Pillai of Mannathu and he was affectionately called "Mannathu Acharyan"<sup>i</sup> by the people. He was a multifaceted personality who took active part in Vaikom and Guruvayoor Satyagraha against the high caste Hindus. Mannathu practiced what he preached.<sup>ii</sup> In the old days the caste structure in Kerala was different from the systems in other parts of India. The low caste Hindus were not allowed to enter into the Karpagraha<sup>3</sup> of the temples. High caste people also considered them as untouchables, unseeables and unapproachables. The people of different castes had to keep a particular distance from the castes above them. This was called the endal.<sup>4</sup> Due to his tireless effort, all low caste Hindus were allowed to enter all the temple across Kerala.<sup>5</sup>

## His early life

Mannathu Padmanabhan was born on January 1878 at Perunna village of Changanacherry in Kottayam District. <sup>6</sup> His father was Neelaman Eshwaran Namboodhiri who was a great Sanskrit Scholar. His mother was Chittathu Parvathi Amma. He was the eldest son of the family. He got married at the age of 23, but lost his first wife in 1912. After two years he married a second time, which also lasted only for six years before she died. His third marriage took place in 1932 with Madhavi Amma, who was also a famous social worker apart from being and writer.

When he was four years old his father left the family, after which his mother got married again. He started his career as a government school teacher at Changanacherry, but resigned after a short period of service. During this time he cleared the magistrate examination and began to practice as a lawyer in Changanacherry court, which was also when he started his social activities and became popular among the people. <sup>7</sup> His main aim was to eradicate untouchability and opened temples to all low caste Hindus. So he took active part in Guruvayoor Satyagraha in 1931-32 as a social reformer. <sup>8</sup>

## ***Mannath and Guruvayoor Satyagraha***

After the 'Savarnajatha' Guruvayoor Satyagraha was organized by the famous Gandhian and Congress leader Sri. K. Kelappan. Mannathu Padmanabhan, who was an old friend of Kelappan, was invited to the preliminary meeting of Guruvayoor Satyagraha, which was also backed by the Malabar Congress Party. So the Satyagraha at Guruvayoor was strengthened and it took a different shape. The main aim of Mannathu Padmanabhan was the eradication of evil practices which prevailed in the Hindu society.<sup>10</sup>In the old days Brahmins considered themselves as high caste in the society and also did not let the lower caste Hindus enter the temple premises or even the roads to the temples. The situation led Mannathu Padmanabhan to take part in Guruvayoor Satyagraha.<sup>11</sup>His involvement in the Satyagraha also led to the strengthening of the Congress party in Travancore where they did not have any influence.

## ***Vadakara Congress Committee (1931)***

The Congress Committee which met at Vadakara in 1931 decided to start a Satyagraha at Guruvayoor to get the temple opened to all Hindus.<sup>12</sup> This had led to the meeting in which Mannathu Padmanabhan was elected as a member of the Guruvayoor Satyagraha Committee. Many sub-committees were formed in which Mannath was also given the charge of publicity.<sup>13</sup>

A.K. Gopalan and other leaders like Mannath visited the villages in Malabar.<sup>14</sup> to form mass opinion in support of temple entry for low caste Hindus.<sup>15</sup> After these visits Mannath organized meetings in different parts of Cochin and Travancore for the eradication of untouchability. Mannathu travelled throughout Kerala, organizing meetings and addressing gatherings. In all his speeches he stressed the importance of the abolishment of untouchability, the curse of Hinduism.<sup>16</sup> Kelappan decided to start the Satyagraha under the Banyan tree near the eastern gate of the temple where Mannathu was a regular speaker.

## ***Participation of National leaders in Guruvayoor Satyagraha***

Guruvayoor Satyagraha shocked the people all over India. Leaders from every part of India came to Guruvayoor. With all Congress leaders worried about the health of Kelappan, Mahatma Gandhi asked him to end his fast. Respecting the voice of Mahatma Gandhi, Kelappan obeyed and ended his fast.

As the high caste Hindus were against giving permission to low caste people to enter into the Guruvayoor temple,<sup>17</sup> Mahatma Gandhi suggested to take a referendum of high caste Hindus in the matter to arrive at a favourable opinion among high caste Hindus. Congress leaders like Kasturba Gandhi, Urmila Devi and C. Rajagopalachari came to Kerala. They toured villages talking with high caste Hindus about the social evil of untouchability.<sup>18</sup> The Congress Committee was to create a mass opinion against untouchability, which called on Mannathu to make speeches and help them in the propaganda.

They travelled in small groups from village to village, talking to everyone about the evils of untouchability and the need to eradicate it. At first, Mannathu travelled with Kasturba, and later in the group of Rajagopalachari and Urmila Devi. In each group there were volunteers who translate speeches from Hindi and English into Malayalam.<sup>19</sup> This continued for one week. After this team work, a referendum was held. The great majority of high caste Hindus voted in support of giving entry to low caste Hindus into Guruvayoor temple.

## ***Mahatma Gandhiji's visit in Kerala***

In 1937, Mahatma Gandhi visited Kerala.<sup>20</sup> The Temple Entry Proclamation of Travancore pleased Gandhiji very much. Gandhiji travelled from Trivandrum to the north passing Quilon and reached Alleppy. Then he travelled from Alleppy to Kottayam, and later reached Changanacherry on January 20, 1937. Mannathu Padmanabhan received Gandhi at the gate of the Nair Service Society.<sup>21</sup> Mannathu led Mahatma to Perunna temple with due ceremony and respect.

## *Perunna Devi Temple opened for Harijans*

Before granting temple entry to low caste Hindus, the Perunna Devi Temple was opened as a result of Mannathu Padmanabhan's efforts to eradicate untouchability. Mannathu considered the temple premises as fit to receive Gandhiji who had dedicated his heart and soul for the upliftment of Harijans.<sup>22</sup> At the meeting Harijan Sevak Samaj also paid homage to Gandhiji. The speeches made by the leaders of Harijans on this occasion made Gandhiji very happy, and due to the effort of Mannathu Padmanabhan, Guruvayoor temple was opened to all *avarna* Hindus.

## **Conclusion**

Thus Mannathu Padmanabhan played a vital role in Guruvayoor Satyagraha. Even though he belonged to a high caste and had the same religious faith, he was not able to tolerate the evil practices adopted by the caste Hindus in Travancore. After the call of Gandhiji for the eradication of untouchability, he took active part in Vaikom and Guruvayoor Satyagraha against the untouchability which prevailed in the Hindu Society against the low caste Hindus. He dedicated his time, energy and everything not only for the uplift of Nair community, but for all the oppressed communities of the State. His social activities suitably recognized him when the central government honoured him by giving the award of Padmabhooshan in the year 1966. In 1978, at the age of 93, he passed away. His demise was a great loss not only to the Nair community of Kerala but to all.

## **REFERENCES**

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