



SOCIAL DIMENSION OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION : TEMPLE ENTRY MOVEMENTS IN MALABAR

Dr. M. Madhavan

Associate Professor, Department of History,
Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit,
Kalady. Regional Centre, Payyanur, Kerala.



ABSTRACT

Human rights are the rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and many more. The world today, has accepted the notion that all human beings are entitled to and are empowered for a dignified existence. It is a common phenomenon that human beings everywhere, demand the realization of diverse values to ensure their individual and collective well-being. However, these demands or rights are denied through exploitation, oppression, persecution, etc, in many countries of the world. The temple entry movement is a kind of social movement aims to make a total change in the social and cultural system. It was an effort to secure human rights for certain sections of the society or a movement for the entry of untouchables to temples. The temple entry movement was of primary importance in the agitation against the eradication of untouchability.

KEYWORDS: Human rights , right to work and education.

INTRODUCTION :

The Kerala society witnessed the formation of caste groups all over the agrarian regions during the 9th and 10th centuries.¹ Therefore it could be stated that caste system in Kerala was a byproduct of the development of an agrarian society and economy. The caste system in Kerala by joining hands with the janmi system reached its growth in the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries.² The social system of Malabar in the 19th century was well-entrenched in the principle of caste and kinship. Caste system as an institution created separation and segmentation in the part of each and every section of Malabar society.³ Even after the advent of the British as a political power the native practices were maintained on the basis of hierarchical order from the sacred to the unworthy.⁴

The principles of social freedom and equality found no place in the Hindu social organisation. The upper castes like *Nambudiris*, *Kshatriyas*, *Ambalavasis* and *Nairs* enjoyed several immunities and privileges. People were made to live in a society conditioned by inferior relations, recognising their relative positions not as being degrading but as elevating.⁵ The low castes like *Kammalas* (artisans), *Ezhavas* or *Tiyyas* (toddy tappers), *Mukkuvars* (Fisherman) etc had not the courage to challenge the established order. They thought that it was their bounden duty to perpetuate the unequal and reactionary society. The polluting castes were subjected to gross social and economic disabilities. All the domestic concerns of the lower castes, all their social activities and all their liberty of thought and actions were regulated by the arbitrary will of the upper castes. Not one of them in their religious capacity was allowed to move the little finger except on

consultation with the upper castes and disobedience to their orders was often visited with their displeasure and the resulting depreciation of their means of livelihood and even banishment from the society.⁶

The caste system was developed in the form of a hierarchy based on the rigid rules of purity and pollution. Untouchability (pollution or *ayitham* by touch) , the most venomous evil of the Hindu society existed in a dreadful form in Malabar society. Untouchability was not a separate institution, it was a corollary of the institution of the caste system.⁷ . It was the most inhuman form of social oppression. Under no institution was man so deeply humiliated and crushed as under that of untouchability.⁸ It was the chief source of almost all disabilities the depressed classes suffered. The untouchables were subjected to bitter exploitation by the upper castes. The members of polluting castes had to keep themselves at the prescribed distances from those of upper castes. Unapproachability (pollution by approach) and unseeability (pollution by sight) were also so perfectly worked out in the society. The untouchables who violated the pollution rules were subjected to severe punishments. It was the paradox that the lower castes who were themselves subjected to the social disability of untouchability practiced discrimination in their dealing with the castes considered as inferior to them in the social scale.

The low castes were the victims of the social tyranny for centuries and continued to live under serious social and religious handicaps. The low caste people were treated in the most inhuman and barbarious manner by the high castes. They were denied even basic human rights. They were denied admission to temples, palaces, schools and places of public resorts. They were not allowed to use public roads and highways as there was always a certain fear of causing atmospheric pollution to high caste people.⁹ The low caste Hindus who were converted to Christianity or Islam immediately got those privileges conferred on them without any protest from the Caste Hindus.¹⁰

It was the deplorable social condition that paved the way for the emergence of social reform movements in Malabar. The leaders of the national movement in Malabar adopted concrete programmes to fight these social evils. They firstly passed resolutions in the meetings urging the public opinion and religious organisations to eradicate the evil of untouchability.¹¹ The nationalists also fought against the denial of accessibility to public spaces for untouchables. For example, the roads near to the Calicut Tali temple was closed to the polluting castes stating that their entry will turn the place polluting.¹² Rejecting such beliefs as superstition and ungrounded the nationalists appealed to the elites to open all public roads to the lower castes. To break the existing elite conventions the nationalists leaders walked through the road near to the Tali temple, along with a group of men belonging to various lower castes.¹³ It encouraged common people to be dare enough to walk through the road near Tali temple and even remove the board on the road prohibiting the lower castes' entry. The AICC meeting of 1923 at Kakinada decided to work vigorously for the eradication of untouchability and gave direction to all provincial committees. The Kerala provincial congress committee decided to launch an immediate movement demanding the opening of all public roads and public spaces (including temples) for lower caste people and the historic Vaikom Satyagraha began on March 30, 1924. The success of Vaikom Satyagraha gave strength to the human right movements in Malabar.

The Kerala Provincial Congress sub-committee for the eradication of untouchability felt that untouchability could be wiped out only if the depressed classes were permitted to enter the temples. The Congress leaders like K. Kelappan, T.R. Krishna Swami Iyer, A.K. Gopalan and others strongly criticized the policy of conservative Hindus and the denial of temple entry to the untouchables.¹⁴ They contended that untouchability had no sanction in the Hindu scriptures. They also stated that it was created by certain propertied persons to keep themselves in power and to block the development of others. The fifth Kerala provincial political conference was held at Badagara on 4th and 5th May 1931 under the presidency of Mr. J.M. Sengupta. In his presidential address he gave a clear exposition of the Congress programme and exhorted the people of Kerala to work for the removal of all social disabilities and caste restrictions.¹⁵ It was decided to launch anti-untouchability campaign as one of the programmes of the Congress in Kerala for the next year.¹⁶ The Badagara conference requested the temple authorities and caste Hindus to open all the temples to all Hindus irrespective of caste.¹⁷

Kelappan attended the All India Congress Committee meeting at Bombay on July 9, 1931 and gave representation to Gandhiji and the Congress working committee regarding the need for temple entry movement in Kerala. He also explained the recommendations of the temple entry movement. Gandhiji insisted that Kelappan should launch temple entry movement in Malabar. He hoped that untouchability, which centered around the temples, would fade away if all Hindus irrespective of caste were given permission to enter and pray in the temples. The temple entry Satyagraha was the means by which the grievances of oppressed castes could be redressed.¹⁸ The Kerala Provincial Congress Committee meeting held at Calicut on 2 August 1931 passed a formal resolution on the question of temple entry. The meeting also decided to conduct a wide propaganda campaign on temple entry Satyagraha. The meeting decided to start a Satyagraha in front of the Sree Krishna Temple, Guruvayur.

Kelappan with A.K. Gopalan, N.P. Damodaran, Mannath Padmanabhan, M. Karthiyani Amma, T.S. Tirumumb, K.P. Kayyalkkal and many others travelled in different parts of Kerala in connection with the propaganda work of Guruvayur temple entry Satyagraha. They organized the natives and conducted several meetings and processions. In the meetings they explained the programme of Temple entry Satyagraha and the need to eradicate the evil of untouchability. A procession of sixteen volunteers led by T. Subramanian Tirumumb started its journey from Kannur on 21 October 1931.¹⁹ A.K. Gopalan was the captain of the procession. The volunteers of the procession ranged from the low caste Harijans to the high caste *Nambudiris*.²⁰ The people gave warm reception to the procession at places like Tellicherry, Vatakara, Quilandy, Calicut and Feroke, that is, on its way to Guruvayur.²¹ The procession was warmly received by a huge crowd assembled at Guruvayur temple on November 1, 1931. The procession awakened the people and aroused a strong anti-untouchability feeling among the people.

The historically significant Guruvayur Temple Entry Satyagraha for granting the right of temple entry to low castes was started in the eastern entrance (*Kizhakke Nada*) to the Guruvayur temple on November 1, 1931 with a speech by the leader of Satyagraha, K. Kelappan. In his speech Kelappan said that "Righteousness is our strength. It is the blessings of Gandhiji which give inspiration to our struggle. The evil of untouchability is a great insult to our country and time. Work for the eradication of untouchability, work for the success of the Satyagraha". Prominent leaders like A.K. Gopalan, Mannath Padmanabhan, N.P. Damodaran, T.S. Tirumumb, Vishnu Bharatheeyan, P. Krishna Pillai, Kurur Neelakantan Nambudiripadu and T.R. Krishna Swami Iyer actively participated in the Satyagraha. The women volunteers stood in the entrance staging Satyagraha and participated in the Bhajans, meetings and processions.

A.K. Gopalan, who was the volunteer captain of the Satyagraha, led the volunteers to the temple premises in a procession and two Satyagrahis belonging to the lower castes were posted on all three entrances to the temple. The Satyagrahis were relieved every three hours.²² Everyday, the Satyagraha began early in the morning and continued up to 10 pm in the night. In all evenings public meetings were convened to propagate the mission of the Satyagraha. On all days the volunteers read Puranas under the leadership of Vishnu Bharatheeyan. The popular response to the Satyagraha was tremendous. Day by day the temple entry Satyagraha gained much popularity in the country. National leaders like Sardar Vallabhai Patel, K.M. Munshi, Jawaharlal Nehru, P.C. Ray, Kasturbha Gandhi and many others send messages wishing the temple entry movement all success. The Satyagraha inspired the youth and they worked in the forefront for the success of the struggle. All Malayalam newspapers, especially the *Mathrubhumi*, supported and gave publicity to the Guruvayur Satyagraha by publishing editorials and articles explaining the need for the eradication of untouchability from society.

The temple authorities and local reactionaries began to use physical force against the peaceful and non-violent Satyagrahis. On December 22, P. Krishna Pillai entered the temple and rang the sacred bell suspended at the *mukha mandapa* of the temple, which was a privilege enjoyed exclusively by the Brahmins. He was seriously beaten up by the temple watchmen. On December 26 A. K. Gopalan, the volunteer captain of the Satyagraha, was also severely beaten up and kicked by the watchmen with the support of a group of caste Hindus. These happenings enraged the supporters of the temple entry Satyagraha. They by using axes and other weapons demolished the barbed wire fencing before the entrance of the temple.

The Guruvayur Satyagraha got great encouragement when the authorities of many private temples in various parts of Malabar opened their doors for the low castes. In April, 1932 Dr. P.S. Varier, the noted Ayurvedic Physician and founder of Kottakkal Arya Vaidyasala opened his private temple, the Viswambara temple in Kottakkal for Harijans.²³ In August 1932, Madhusoodanan Thangal threw open his private temple in Mattannur to all castes. A temple in Talikkulam and another in Akathethara were opened to all castes in September 1932. In the same month a *Tiyya* temple in Kannur was also thrown open to the Harijans. The trustees of Sri Ramaswami Temple at Tali in Calicut also decided to allow the Harijans to enter the temple. In Eravamangalam, Palloli Nambudiri granted the right of entry to the untouchables in his private temple.

The Guruvayur Satyagraha took a new turn on 13 September 1932 when Gandhiji announced his decision to start 'fast unto death' on 21 September in protest against the decision of the government to have separate electorate for scheduled castes in India. Kelappan considered it as the most opportune moment to attract public attention to the temple entry movement. On 18 September 1932 Kelappan announced his decision to fast unto death in front of the Guruvayur temple till the untouchability was abolished. The national leaders and the co-workers like A.K. Gopalan, T.S. Tirumumb and others tried to retract Kelappan's decision to fast. But he was unyielding and began his historic fast on 21 September at the *Kizhakke Nada* (Eastern Gate) of the temple. He refused even the little shade of a thatched shed. The meetings held in various parts of Kerala requested Zamorin, the trustee of the temple to convene a conference of all Hindus for the discussion of the important issue of the temple entry. But he gave a negative reply.

Kelappan got physically weaker day by day and his fast paralysed the other activities of the Congress in Malabar for the time being. People from various parts of the country requested Gandhiji to advise Kelappan to withdraw his fast. Gandhiji said, I can not allow Kelappan, one of the noblest of India's silent servants to die. Gandhiji sent a telegram to Kelappan asking him to suspend the fast. He assured Kelappan that even if after propaganda and requests the Guruvayur temple remain closed for long, he would share the responsibility in leading the fast after three months. Thus finally in response to Gandhiji's advice and assurance Kelappan withdrew his fast by taking lemon juice at 8 am on 2nd October 1932, the birthday of Gandhiji. After the suspension of Kelappan's fast and the calling off of the temple entry Satyagraha it was decided to carry on a vigorous anti-untouchability campaign all over Kerala. A procession of 16 volunteers led by A.K. Gopalan set out on 11 October 1932 to tour the whole of Kerala on foot, carrying on propaganda and addressing massive meetings everywhere.²⁴ In the meetings they talked about the necessity of the eradication of untouchability and other social evils from the society.

Gandhiji was of the opinion that the temple entry question at Guruvayur should be settled through a referendum. As per the instruction of Gandhiji the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee conducted a referendum among the caste Hindus of Ponnani taluk where the Guruvayur temple was situated to ascertain their views on the question of temple entry to the untouchables. The result of the referendum was a moral victory for the Congress. About 20,000 persons recorded their opinion of which 77% voted in favour of temple entry, 13% against and 10% remained neutral.²⁵ A significant feature of the referendum was that more than 8000 women expressed their choice in favour of temple entry. Though Guruvayur temple entry Satyagraha failed to achieve its immediate objective of the opening of the temple to the untouchables, it helped to focus public attention on the age-long social evil of untouchability. It created a climate favourable to the eventual abolition of untouchability.

The social reformers realised the evil effects of the caste system and untouchability. They were against the denial of the basic rights of the lower sections of the Hindu society. Among them the name of Swami Ananda Theerthan had a lasting place. Ananda Theerthan conducted struggle for temple entry to all people irrespective of caste. Ananda Theerthan participated in the Guruvayur temple entry satyagraha. He worked to recruit volunteers to the Satyagraha. He was a member of a procession of sixteen volunteers procession led by T. Subramanian Tirumumb on October 21, 1931 from Kannur to take part in the Guruvayur Satyagraha. Ananda Theerthan said, "temple is the biggest institution which protects casteism and untouchability. I go to temples only to enquire whether untouchability is installed at that place and, if so to destroy them".²⁶ He conducted direct struggle against untouchability and other caste discrimination.

Ananda Theerthan worked for the freedom of worship of the Harijans. The illiterate Harijans were accustomed to make offerings to the temples though they had to stand outside the temple premises. During the time of temple festivals the Harijans were in the habit of offering pepper, paddy, cock, and money to the caste Hindus. He opposed it and said that, it was a paradox that there was no untouchability to untouchable people's offerings and presents. Theerthan conducted wide propaganda among the Harijans and the Harijans in Ezhome village and other places in north Malabar stopped the usual presents and offerings to the temple as part of the festival. Thus Swami Ananda Theerthan succeeded in stopping the Harijans from making offerings to temples where they were denied entry.

Though the famous Madras Temple Entry Authorisation Act Passed on 2 June 1947 allowed all Hindus to enter the temples in Madras Presidency, certain temples continued their age-old practice of denying entry to Harijans. The authorities of *Ramavillyam Kazhakam* in Trikaripur near Payyannur denied the entry of Harijans into the temple. In 1948 Swami Ananda Theerthan with a few Harijan youths went to the temple and conducted a fast for three days.²⁷ The progressive-minded youths declared their fullhearted support to Swami Ananda Theerthan's movement. Later in 1950, the Madras government made some amendments in the temple entry act according to which all the temples, both public and private by owned, Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical were thrown open to all Hindus irrespective of their caste.²⁸

Ananda Theerthan was particularly determined to get the temples of Gowda Saraswatha Brahmins, his own community, opened to all people irrespective of caste. The admission of *Tiyyas*, Harijans and other backward caste people was denied to the temples of Gowda Saraswatha Brahmins. Ananda Theerthan with a group of *Tiyyas* and Harijans led a march to the temple on 1 January 1958.²⁹ The caste Hindus led by Gowda Saraswatha Brahmins prevented and stopped them at the outer gate of the temple. Ananda Theerthan decided to start a fast in front of the temple and represented the matter to the government. Finally the police registered a caste against the temple authorities. Later the temples was opened to all people irrespective of caste.

The reform activities of Ananda Theerthan and the nationalists against the denial of temple entry to the untouchable castes is an important episode in the history of human rights movements in Malabar. The movements to a great extent caused the abolition of the then existing social evils, meaningless customs and practices and in promoting the dignity of the individual, equality of sexes and education. The low castes got entry into temples and other places which were otherwise denied to them. In short the reform activities contributed much to the awakening of depressed classes and brought significant and progressive changes in the social, economic and cultural fields of Malabar.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

1. Rajan Gurukul, 1994, "The formation of caste society in Kerala-Historical Antecedents" in K.L. Sharma (Ed), *Caste and Class in India*, New Delhi: Rawat Publications, p. 395.
2. M.G.S. Narayanan, 1986, "Keralathile Jathisambradayavum Janmi Sambradayavum Oru Charithralokanam" in M. Gangadharan (Ed), *Jathivyavastha-Padanangal*, (Mal.) Trichur: Janakeeya Prasadheekarana Kendram, pp. 81-82.
3. Adrian. C. Mayor, 1952, *Malabar: Land and Society*, Bombay: Oxford University Press, p. 25.
4. K.K.N. Kurup, 1977, *Aspects of Kerala History and Culture*, Trivandrum: College Book House, p. 39.
5. T.K. Ravindran, 1972, *Asan and Social Revolution in Kerala*, Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, p.23.
6. T.K. Gopalpanikkar, 1995, *Malabar and Its Folk*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, p.12.
7. R.K. Kshirsagar, 1989, *Untouchability in India-Implementation of the Law and Abolition*, New Delhi : Deep & Deep Publications, p.23.
8. A.R. Desai, 1996, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, Bombay: Popular Prakasan: p.264.
9. M.S.A. Rao, 1957, *Social change in Malabar*, Bombay: Popular Prakasan, p.22.
10. A. Sreedhara Menon, 1990, *Kerala History and its Makers*, Madras: S.Viswanathan Publishers, p.221.
11. C.K. Kareem, 1971, *Kerala and her culture - An Introduction*, Trivandrum: Kerala Bhasha Institute, p.32.

12. C.K. Moosath, 1982, *Kelappan Enna Mahamanushyan*, (Mal.), Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society Ltd, p. 74.
13. K.P. Kesava Menon, 1969, *Kazhinjakalam – Autobiography*, (Mal.), Calicut: Mathrubhumi Printing and Publishing Co. Ltd, p.44.
14. V.R. Menon, 1973, *Mathrubhumiude Charitram*, Vol. I, (Mal.), Calicut: Mathrubhumi Printing and Publishing Co. Ltd, p.467.
15. P.K.K. Menon, 2001, *History of Freedom Movement in Kerala*, Vol. II, Thiruvananthapuram: Department of Cultural Publications, Government of Kerala, p.277.
16. Moyyarth Sankaran, 1965, *Ente Jeevitha Katha- Autobiography*, (Mal.), Calicut: P.K. Brothers, pp.286-289.
17. A.K. Pillai, 1935, *Congressum Keralavum*, (Mal.), Trivandrum: Kerala Samsthana Congress Committee, p.407.
18. K. Gopalankutty, 1981, "The Guruvayur Satyagraha, 1931-32" in T.K. Ravindran (Ed), *Journal of Kerala Studies*, Vol- VIII, March-December, Trivandrum: University of Kerala, p.45.
19. .S. Tirumumb, 1989, *Smaranakal Kavithakal*, (Memoirs and Poems), (Mal.), Trichur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, p.78.
20. A.K. Gopalan, 2009, *Ente Jeevitha Katha- Autobiography*, (Mal.) Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publications, p.38.
21. K.N.V. Krishnan Nambiar, 2005, *Vishnu Bharatheeyan*, (Mal.), Thiruvananthapuram: Department of Cultural Publications, Government of Kerala, p.29.
22. K. Gopalankutty, 2007, *Malabar Padanangal* (Mal.), Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Bhasha Institute, p.70.
23. V.R. Menon, *Op.Cit.*, p.441.
24. A.K. Gopalan, *Op.Cit.*, pp. 49-50.
25. A. Sreedhara Menon, 1996, *Cultural Heritage of Kerala*, Madras: S. Viswanathan Publishers, p.229.
26. Swaminath Padinjaremana, 2001, *Brahmasree Swami Ananda Theerthajiyude Jeeva Charitha Samgraham*, (Pamphlet), (Mal.), Payyannur: Swami Ananda Theertha Trust, p.11.
27. V.K. Kunhiraman, , 1971, *Swami Ananda Theerthan*, (Mal.), Tellichery : Janatha Press, p.36.
28. Vanidas Elayavoor , 2006, *Theerthaprayanam*, (Mal.), Kannur: Kairali Books, p.96.
- 29 A.M. Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, 1987, *Swami Ananda Thirth- Untocuhability: Gandhian Solution on Trial*, Delhi: ISPC, p.98.



Dr. M. Madhavan

Associate Professor, Department of History, Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady. Regional Centre, Payyanur, Kerala.