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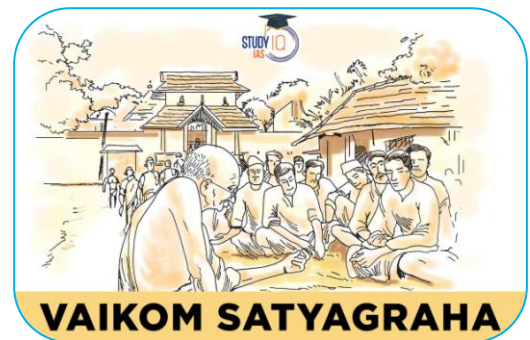
CENTENARY OF THE VAIKOM SATYAGRAHA- A PIVOTAL MOMENT IN HUMAN HISTORY

Dr. P. Nagoorkani

**Associate Professor and Head (Rtd), Department of Modern History,
School of Historical Studies Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai.**

ABSTRACT

A little over a century ago, a significant socio-political event unfolded that was unparalleled in its impact. The Vaikom Struggle, which resulted in the removal of restrictions preventing lower caste Hindus from entering the local temple in the former Princely State of Travancore, marked the beginning of numerous mass movements that drew political focus to the need for religious reform. Since that time, the Dravidian Movement, established by Periyar E.V.Ramasami (E.V.R.), along with its principles of self-respect, has facilitated broader reforms within Hinduism and contributed to the establishment of a more equitable society. It is important to recognize that these advancements were made possible by the inclusion of a crucial clause in the Constitution, introduced by B.R. Ambedkar. The Vaikom centenary commemoration not only serves as a tribute to the determination of E.V.R. and the vision of B.R. Ambedkar, but also as a reaffirmation of the enduring reformist spirit that continues to influence contemporary politics in South India.



KEYWORDS : E.V.Ramasami (E.V.R.), T.K.Madhavan, Mahatma Gandhi, Vaikom, Satyagraha, M.K. Stalin, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Travancore.

BACKDROP OF VAIKOM

Vaikom, a small town regarded as one of the most sacred locations, is situated on the eastern shore of Vembanad Kayal Lake in the central region of the former Travancore Princely State. Each year, thousands of pilgrims gather here to celebrate *Ashtami*, a religious festival that occurs during the month of *Maasi* (February/March) and *Karthigai* (November/December).¹ At the heart of Vaikom lies a Siva temple, which features four entrances, one on each side. The temple is positioned at a crossroads, with the surrounding roads utilized for the temple's holy processions. Historically, the *avarnas* (outcastes) were prohibited from even approaching these roads, being restricted to a distance of four furlongs from the temple, as indicated by notice boards placed at specific points.² The temple was under the jurisdiction of the Travancore Government, which managed its affairs through appointed officials. The government also acted as the trustee of the temple, maintaining the access roads with public funds.³ These roads were accessible to Brahmins and other caste-Hindus (including Nairs), as well as to Muhammadans, Christians, and other non-Hindus.⁴ Among these groups, Tamil Brahmins and Malayala Brahmins, commonly referred to as Nambuthiris, were permitted to enter the sanctum sanctorum of the Vaikom temple to perform *poojas*, or rituals dedicated to the deity.⁵ In the vicinity of the Vaikom temple, the practice of untouchability was rigorously enforced. Individuals from lower castes, including the Tiyayas, Pulayyas, and Nadars, were prohibited from using the same four roads that were accessible to

Brahmins and other caste-Hindus.⁶If an untouchable needed to cross to the other side of the temple, they were required to divert two or three furlongs away and walk approximately a mile to reach their destination. This restriction also applied to various professionals, such as Kammalars, Vaniyars, and Weavers. Significant government institutions, including the court and police station, were located adjacent to the temple entrance. Consequently, during official transfers, no untouchables were assigned to these offices, as they were barred from entering the roads surrounding the temple. Additionally, casual labourers, or coolies, were also prohibited from accessing these roads to reach nearby shops.⁷In 1905, a signboard was installed that forbade individuals from marginalized castes from using these roads.⁸

T.K.MADHAVAN AND NARAYANA GURU

In 1917, T.K. Madhavan, a prominent Ezhava leader, made a significant call for the inclusion of marginalized communities in temple entry through an editorial published in *Deshabhimani*. As a journalist and social reformer aligned with the Sree Narayana Guru Dharma Paripalanam (S.N.D.P.), established by Sree Narayana Guru, Madhavan recognized caste oppression as a fundamental societal issue. By 1920, motivated by Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement, he adopted a more confrontational stance, personally traversing the prohibited paths near the Vaikom temple as an act of resistance.

The movement gained considerable traction when several leaders from the Indian National Congress (I.N.C.), including Gandhi, expressed their support for the initiative. T.K. Madhavan was able to meet Gandhi in 1921 and got his approval for conducting vigorous campaign aiming at opening temples to all individuals. During the I.N.C. session of I.N.C. in Kakinada, the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee (K.P.C.C.) officially prioritized the struggle against untouchability. The organizing secretary of S.N.D.P., K Madhavan was the main protagonist for passing the temple entry resolution there.⁹This event marked the commencement of a widespread public campaign advocating for the accessibility of Hindu temples and public roads to marginalized communities.

When this situation prevailed in the Princely State of Travancore, E.V.R. encountered considerable obstacles in his social mission as a result of the pressure exerted by Brahmins at multiple conferences in Tamil region of the Madras Presidency. He patiently awaited the opportune moment to showcase his deep commitment to social reform. Upon assuming the President ship of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee (T.N.C.C.) in 1924, he seized every chance to promote idea of social reform.¹⁰ He was particularly observant of the widespread dissatisfaction that existed in the neighbouring Travancore State regarding traditional practices, which were supported by the State Government. During E.V.R.'s leadership of the T.N.C.C., the Ezhavas, a prominent caste in Travancore, expressed their grievances about the stringent restrictions placed upon them, which they found to be demeaning, despite their educational and economic advancements.¹¹

ANTI-UNTOUCHABILITY SATYAGRAHA AT VAIKOM

Sri Narayana Guru, a distinguished social reformer, undertook a tireless campaign to combat the social injustices faced by the Ezhava community.¹²The Ezhavas were diligently working towards their social upliftment, with the goal of gaining access to state temples and rectifying disparities within Hindu society.¹³ The Congress leaders in Travancore sought to publicize these issues widely. The situation escalated when T.K. Madhavan, a wealthy Ezhava lawyer, was denied entry to the Court located within the palace grounds of Sri Mulam Tirunal (1885-1924), the Maharajah of Travancore.¹⁴In response, Congress leaders such as K.P.Kesava Menon, editor of *Mathrubhoomi*, and George Joseph, another political figure, took up the cause, organizing anti-untouchability committees to raise awareness. They gathered volunteers and devised a plan for a satyagraha to express their discontent.¹⁵Vaikom was chosen as the site for this initiative, as it was perceived as a location where 'lower caste' individuals faced severe mistreatment.¹⁶

Following their agenda, the leaders of the K.P.C.C. arrived in Vaikom and convened a public meeting on 29th February 1924¹⁷, marking the beginning of the satyagraha aimed at abolishing the injustices that prevented a specific class from traversing designated roads.¹⁸The leaders, as part of their

satyagraha, propagated that this malevolent practice was equivalent to disrespecting those who were suffering.¹⁹ They communicated their agitation strategy to Mahatma Gandhi and sought his endorsement.²⁰ On 19th March 1924, Mahatma Gandhi advised K.P.Kesava Menon, Secretary of the K.P.C.C., to exercise unwavering and boundless patience in their satyagraha.²¹

Three volunteers wearing *khadi* dress moved towards the Vaikom temple located in the Princely State of Travancore, now part of Kottayam District in Kerala on 30th March 1924. They were represented a different caste. Kunjappu belonged to Pulaya, Bahuleyan, an Ezhava and Govinda Panikkar, a Nair caste (Savarna) volunteers involved.²² They were prevented by the police nearly fifty yards from the location where Satyagrahis had started a procession on public roads that were prohibited to certain caste people.²³ All three were subsequently arrested. Their dignified demeanor made a profound impact on the public.²⁴ Although they did not reach the temple grounds, their actions sparked a monumental year-long struggle that significantly influenced human history. From that moment onward, three volunteers from various communities endeavoured daily to traverse the restricted roads. Despite the arrest of all movement leaders within a week, the momentum of the Vaikom Satyagraha, which fought against untouchability and discrimination, continued to gain strength, capturing the attention of national leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi.

Subsequently, under the leadership of K.P.Kesava Menon, a group of Ezhavas entered the restricted roads of Vaikom on 7th April 1924.²⁵ Upon learning of this, the Maharajah of Travancore instructed W.H. Pitt, the European Commissioner of Police, to apprehend the satyagrahis.²⁶ Approximately nineteen leaders, including K.P.Kesava Menon, T.K. Madhavan, M. Sivathanu Pillai, and K. Kelappan Nair, were arrested but received special treatment in the Trivandrum prison.²⁷ Later, T.K. Madhavan and K.P. Kesava Menon were sentenced to six months of imprisonment for breaching the custom.²⁸ When leaders such as George Joseph and K.G. Nair took the initiative in the arrest of K.P. Kesava Menon, they too were detained.²⁹ In this context, *Swarajya* remarked that the arrest of leaders like George Joseph expanded the movement's wider reach, expressing hope that leaders from across the country would denounce the Travancore Government and extend their support to the satyagrahis.³⁰

The resolute practitioners of satyagraha persisted in their commitment to a non-violent approach. In this context, the *Malayala Manorama*, a prominent newspaper, remarked that the government's efforts to suppress the movement resembled attempting to block a mountain torrent. It suggested that seeking a resolution through peaceful dialogue would be more advantageous than prolonging a struggle that would ultimately lead to defeat and disgrace for the government.³¹ In stark contrast to the persistent recommendations from the press, the government continued to arrest volunteers participating in the agitation.³² These arrests impeded the progress of the satyagraha, and the detained leaders grew concerned that the movement might falter without effective leadership. Consequently, they resolved to protect the movement at all costs.³³ The campaign organizers faced significant challenges in enlisting local volunteers to sustain their efforts.³⁴ Confronted with financial difficulties and a lack of manpower, the satyagraha organizers issued a nationwide appeal for assistance.³⁵ They were apprehensive that a decline in the Vaikom Satyagraha would tarnish the reputation of the Congress party.³⁶ In response, P.Varadarajulu Naidu sent a telegram to the Vaikom campaign, indicating a positive response from the Madras State. Notable individuals, merchants, and mirashdars from Tamil Nadu expressed their willingness to support the Vaikom cause. Varadarajulu Naidu's residence in Trivandrum was utilized to accommodate leaders and volunteers from Tamil Nadu.³⁷

APPEAL TO THE DRAVIDIAN PATRIARCH E.V.R. AND ARREST

Despite Mahatma Gandhi's opposition to accepting financial assistance and volunteer support from outside Travancore, Tamil Nadu extended offers of both manpower and funds to the Vaikom movement.³⁸ To rejuvenate the initiative, the leaders of the K.P.C.C. resolved to issue a special appeal directed particularly at the reformers in Tamil Nadu. E.V.R., a prominent social reformer and president of the T.N.C.C., was unanimously selected by the K.P.C.C. leaders for this task.³⁹ As a result of this appeal, the Vaikom Satyagraha, initially a matter of minor significance, gained national importance.⁴⁰ George

Joseph and Neelakantan Nambuthiri sent a confidential letter to E.V.R. via a courier from their prison cell⁴¹, which stated that E.V.R. must come and invigorate the agitation. If E.V.R. did not, the satyagrahis would have no option but to apologize to the Rajah. While the satyagrahis might not lose anything personally, a noble cause would be jeopardized, which was their true concern. Therefore, the Kerala leaders urged E.V.R. to come immediately and lead the movement.⁴² The courier met E.V.R. at Devaram Pannaipuram, a village in the Madurai District, while he was addressing a public meeting. E.V. R. articulated a compelling notion that society must first liberate itself from the oppressive grip of social injustices before achieving freedom from foreign domination. His belief in rallying public support for this initiative, coupled with his growing prominence both within and outside the Congress party, motivated him to enthusiastically accept the invitation extended by the leaders of the Travancore State to involve in the Vaikom Satyagraha.⁴³ Upon reviewing the letter; E.V.R. promptly cancelled his party tour and hurried to Erode to continue on to Vaikom.⁴⁴

On the eve of his journey to Vaikom, E.V.R. addressed the people of the Tamil Districts with a heartfelt appeal that the call from the neighboring sister province of Kerala was compelling. A serious situation had emerged, characterized by widespread repression. Satyagrahis and leaders, including George Joseph, who were striving to eradicate untouchability—the cornerstone of our Mahatma's mission—had fallen victim to this oppression. These factors weighed heavily on his mind, prompting his departure. It was possible that he might also face arrest, but that held little significance. He urged all sympathizers, whether they were leaders, advocates, volunteers, or individuals of any faith, to converge upon Kerala. For those unable to join, he requested that they should extend their financial support. Numerous volunteers from Tamil Nadu had expressed their eagerness for a satyagraha and many had indicated their willingness to endure hardships for the cause of abolishing untouchability. Listen, all who resonated with this cause; there laid a remarkable opportunity. Did not let it slip away. He implored each of them to hasten and participate in this noble endeavour.⁴⁵ This impassioned appeal from E.V.R. left a profound impact on the Tamil community regarding the issue of untouchability. E.V.R., along with Kovai C.A. Ayyamuthu, Secretary of the Coimbatore Congress Committee, Dr. Namperumal of Nagercoil and a dedicated group of volunteers, including members from the depressed classes, set out from Madurai to Vaikom.⁴⁶ Among the volunteers who travelled to Vaikom was the distinguished K. Kamaraj who later became the President of the T.N.C.C. and three term Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu.⁴⁷ Both Rajaji and S. Srinivasa Iyengar, leaders of the Indian National Congress, contributed financially to the satyagraha committee from Tamil Nadu⁴⁸ and personally visited the Travancore State to bolster the morale of the satyagrahis.⁴⁹

E.V.R. temporarily entrusted the presidentship of the T.N.C.C. to Rajaji and arrived in Vaikom on 13th April 1924⁵⁰, where he was warmly welcomed by the royal family of Travancore.⁵¹ For a while, the movement had stalled due to the arrest of the main leaders of Kerala. However, upon assuming leadership of the satyagraha movement on 13th April 1924, tensions arose between E.V.R. and the Maharajah of Travancore.⁵² W.H. Pitt, the Commissioner of Police, made extensive arrangements to manage the satyagrahis, who were invigorated by E.V.R.'s arrival on the morning of 14th April 1924. E.V.R. initiated his campaign to access the northern and eastern routes leading to the Vaikom temple⁵³, peacefully traversing the restricted paths and challenging the existing customs. In response, the District Magistrate prohibited E.V.R. and two others from entering the area and delivering speeches in Travancore for duration of fifteen days. Nevertheless, the government was unable to suppress E.V.R.'s resolve through legislative measures.⁵⁴ Subsequently, the Magistrate issued a prohibitory order citing concerns over public order. On 22nd May 1924, E.V.R. was arrested for breaching this ban⁵⁵, marking his first experience of imprisonment as a dedicated advocate for social justice in Vaikom. He received a one-month sentence alongside Kovai C.A. Ayyamuthu and several other volunteers from Tamil Nadu⁵⁶, serving part of their sentence in Vaikom and part in Aroor.⁵⁷

Following the arrest of E.V.R., the Akalis from Punjab stepped in to support and elevate the satyagraha into a nationwide movement starting from 29th April 1924.⁵⁸ Mahatma Gandhi viewed the involvement of external participants, particularly the Akalis, as detrimental to the self-respect of the Hindus in Kerala, given his own Hindu identity. Consequently, he urged non-Hindus to refrain from

joining the satyagraha.⁵⁹ Acknowledging Gandhi's concerns, Rajaji addressed E.V.R. in a letter, questioning the necessity of leaving Madras to instigate unrest in Travancore State, deeming such actions inappropriate. He encouraged E.V.R. to return and assume leadership of the T.N.C.C.⁶⁰ Similarly, S.Srinivasa Iyengar, another prominent Brahmin leader from Tamil Nadu, offered the same counsel as Rajaji.⁶¹ However, E.V.R. remained skeptical of their intentions, perceiving it as a covert effort by Brahmins to undermine his campaign for social reforms.⁶²

Upon his release from Arivikkuthu prison on 21st June 1924, where he had been detained for a month, the Travancore Government promptly issued an order for E.V.R. to vacate the State immediately.⁶³ Disregarding this direction, E.V.R. re-engaged in satyagraha activities. During numerous public meetings, he vehemently criticized the government for its abhorrent practice of untouchability. In one of his addresses, he stated that if the deity at the temple in Vaikom believed that the touch of the 'untouchables' would defile it, then God would not reside there. Such an idol should be removed for the purpose of washing clothes.⁶⁴ In another speech, he questioned the authority of the Travancore Maharajah, asserting that if the entire Travancore State was dedicated to Padmanabha swami, he had no right to restrict the entry of untouchables onto the roads of Vaikom.⁶⁵ His compelling speeches in the villages surrounding Vaikom and other areas of Travancore resonated with thousands, compelling them to reconsider their positions. His logical reasoning and persuasive arguments successfully swayed many undecided individuals to support the satyagrahis, even converting some adversaries. On one occasion, he remarked that satyagraha relied on the masses, not on the wealthy. Indeed, his impactful speeches throughout the villages of Travancore were particularly striking, effectively undermining the authority of the Travancore Government.⁶⁶

On 18th July 1924, E.V.R. was arrested for the second time due to his relentless advocacy for social reform at Vaikom during April and May of 1924, where he urged the people to oppose the harmful practice of untouchability, defying a magisterial order.⁶⁷ This time, he received a sentence of six months of rigorous imprisonment in the Central Jail of Trivandrum.⁶⁸ The conditions he endured were harsh. His legs were shackled. A convict's cap was placed on his head. A loin cloth was extended to his knees, and a wooden plate was placed around his neck. E.V.R. laboured alongside murderers and dacoits, performing double the workload typically expected of a convict. His sacrifice as a caste-Hindu for the liberation of the 'untouchables' revitalized the cause of the satyagrahis. The noble purpose of this significant movement inspired him to make such a sacrifice.⁶⁹ It was believed that E.V.R. possessed the fortitude to withstand any adversity, as he was well-versed in the principles of social justice.⁷⁰ Continuing the struggle initiated by E.V.R., his wife Nagammai, his sister S.R. Kannammal, and his follower S. Ramanathan travelled to Vaikom. They resolutely engaged in anti-untouchability campaigns throughout the Travancore State by establishing a women's wing, thereby creating challenges for the Government.⁷¹ Kamalammal and Lakshmi Ammal were important women workers in the women's wing. On 20th May 1924, women commenced their Satyagraha at Vaikom.⁷² Nagammai along with women volunteers travelled throughout Kerala to propagate the ideas behind Vaikom Satyagraha. Nagammai picketed the road along with Lakshmi Ammal on 4th August 1924. They were arrested and remanded in custody for eight days. The penalty of rupees five was imposed on Nagammai. When she was refused to accept the penalty, she was put in jail for a day.⁷³ She organized women's conference and appealed to the rationale of the public.

During E.V.R.'s incarceration, orthodox Hindus conducted the *Satrusamhara Yagam*, a series of bonfire rituals aimed at vanquishing their adversaries, as a response to the actions of the satyagrahis.⁷⁴ At this juncture, Maharajah Sri Mulam Tirunal passed away on 7th August 1924.⁷⁵ On account of the Maharani Sethu Lakshmi Bai, the Regent following the Maharajah's death, released E.V.R. on 31st August 1924⁷⁶, two months prior of the sentence.⁷⁷ Upon his release, E.V.R. received a warm welcome from the satyagraha volunteers. In a press statement, he expressed hope that his freedom would compel the Government to facilitate access to all roads.⁷⁸ E.V.R. promptly returned to Erode, his hometown, to address his long-standing T.N.C.C. matters. However, he was arrested again on 11th September 1924, based on previous political charges.⁷⁹ It was revealed that the trial against E.V.R. was primarily aimed at preventing his involvement in the satyagraha at Vaikom. There were suspicions that his arrest was the

result of a conspiracy orchestrated by two orthodox Brahmin leaders, C.P. Ramasami Aiyar, the Law Member of the Madras Presidency, and Ragavayya, the Diwan of Travancore. Ultimately, the Madras Government dismissed the case upon finding no evidence of wrongdoing, leading to E.V.R.'s release.⁸⁰

VISIT OF MAHATMA GANDHI AND END OF SATYGRAHA

To address the Vaikom issue, Mahatma Gandhi, accompanied by his son Ramdas Gandhi, Mahadev Desai, Rajaji and Ramanathan arrived in Travancore on 8th March 1925, to engage in negotiations with the Travancore Government.⁸¹ Their objective was to rectify the situation concerning untouchability related to the roads leading to the Vaikom temple. On 9th March 1925, Mahatma Gandhi travelled to Vaikom to engage in negotiations with upper-caste leaders who were staunchly opposed to the demands of the Satyagrahis. However, Gandhi was not allowed entry into the Indamthuruthi Mana, the Brahmin household overseeing the Vaikom temple. Historians recount that a temporary shelter was constructed nearby where Gandhi was offered a seat. As a Vaishya, considered a lower caste within the social hierarchy, he was seated outside to prevent "polluting" the Mana by entering.

Gandhi was set to meet Neelakandan Nambyathiri, the head of Indamthuruthi Mana, a notable family among 48 influential Brahmin households. The Indamthuruthi family not only wielded power over other Brahmin families but also governed the Vaikom Mahadev temple. The term 'Mana' is traditionally used in Malayalam to refer to the residences of Nambudiri Brahmins in Kerala.⁸²

The Maharani of Travancore was fully aware of the pressing Vaikom problem and expressed a desire to confer with E.V.R. However, Ragavayya, the Diwan, arranged for the Maharani Regent to request that Mahatma Gandhi⁸³ obtain a guarantee from E.V.R. that he would refrain from advocating for the entry of 'untouchables' into any temples in Travancore in the future, provided that their access to the roads was granted. Mahatma Gandhi subsequently met with E.V.R. to convey the Maharani's condition. E.V.R. was dissatisfied with Gandhi's approach to the issue, as he sought both unrestricted access to the roads and entry into the temples, disapproving of Gandhi's conciliatory stance.⁸⁴ Ultimately, lacking alternative options, he resolved to accept the opening of the roads while continuing to advocate for temple entry in due course.⁸⁵ Following a temporary suspension of his agitation, a compromise was reached between Mahatma Gandhi and the Regent Maharani. Consequently, all roads, except those on the eastern side of the Vaikom temple, were opened to the *avarna* Hindus with effect from 7th April 1925.⁸⁶ In fact, due to the influence exerted by E.V.R., the Travancore Government partially eased segregation⁸⁷, and the prohibitory order was ultimately rescinded on 23rd November 1925. As a result, all pathways were directed towards the marginalized communities.⁸⁸ On 29th November 1925, the victory ceremony of Vaikom Satyagraha was held. E.V.R., and Nagammai were invited. E.V.R. was asked to preside over the function but participated and delivered a speech in it. He had spoken that the Government which refused to give right, then invited the satyagrahis to participate in the function and this was a sign for the victory for the satyagraha.⁸⁹

VAIKOM HERO

E.V.R. was celebrated for this significant accomplishment, with Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundaranar referring to him as the 'Vaikom Hero' in his publications, *Navasakthi* and the Tamil work, *Vazhkai Kurippugal (Notes on Life)*.⁹⁰ Rajaji wrote that Tamil Nadu was hailing the Activist (Theerar) E.V.R.⁹¹ Following the agitation initiated by E.V.R. at Vaikom, leaders from the depressed classes, such as B.R. Ambedkar, fervently commenced their struggle for social rights.⁹² Consequently, E.V.R. received high praise from B.R. Ambedkar during a public gathering in Mahad, Bombay, on March 1925.⁹³ B.R. Ambedkar also acknowledged this event as a significant milestone, which subsequently inspired him to initiate the Mahad Satyagraha.⁹⁴ In 1933, when workers conference was held at Cochin, E.V. R. asserted he was not alone responsible for the success of Vaikom Satyagraha, and the sacrifice of young comrades was also responsible.⁹⁵ It can be asserted that Vaikom was undergoing a transformative process aimed at achieving temple entry.⁹⁶ Notably, the Vaikom Satyagraha was the first of its kind in India to challenge and dismantle the constraints imposed by orthodox religious customs.⁹⁷

AFTERMATHS OF VAIKOM SATYAGRAHA

In the ten years following the Vaikom Satyagraha, various movements emerged across the nation, spearheaded by B.R. Ambedkar, who organized protests aimed at gaining access to the Ambadevi Temple, Amravati (February 1929), Paravati Temple, Pune (October 1929) and Kalram Mandir, Nasik (March 1930) where individuals from untouchable castes were barred from entry. Concurrently, the momentum of socio-religious reform in South India was gaining speed, as demonstrated by the introduction of a bill in the Legislative Assembly in 1932 aimed at allowing entry to temples, the Travancore Temple Entry Proclamation issued by the Maharajah of Travancore in 1936, and the enactment of the Malabar Temple Entry Act by the Madras Legislature in 1938. Additionally, in 1939, untouchable castes were granted access to the Meenakshi Amman Temple and the Thanjavur Brihadeeswara Temple. Subsequently, the Madras Temple Entry Authorization Act of 1947 was able to sanction Hindus of all castes to access and worship in all temples within the erstwhile Madras Presidency.⁹⁸

Although many of these reforms occurred before the adoption of the Constitution of India, the Constituent Assembly was meticulous in defining the right to freedom of religion. During discussions on 7th December 1948, B.R. Ambedkar introduced the phrase "subject to public order, morality and health," which limited the scope of this fundamental right and permitted state intervention when necessary. These seven words established the legal foundation for reforms within the religious domain, enabling constitutional courts to intervene in cases where fundamental rights, particularly those concerning equality and religion, were contested.⁹⁹

Observation of A.R. Venkatachalapathy, Sahitya Academy Winner of 2024

A.R. Venkatachalapathy, a distinguished historian and recipient of the Sahitya Akademy Award in 2024, asserts that E.V.R. successfully fostered amicable relations with lower caste movements and minority groups. He earned the enduring respect of the Ezhava community due to his involvement in the Vaikom Satyagraha (1924-1925). During a period when B.R. Ambedkar, the prominent leader of the 'Untouchables,' faced attempts at marginalization by various dominant political entities, E.V.R. emerged as one of the first leaders to acknowledge him as the authentic spokesperson and representative of India's Untouchables. Furthermore, E.V.R. was among the pioneers in translating Ambedkar's significant works, including *The Annihilation of Caste*.¹⁰⁰

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin's Notion on Vaikom Satyagraha

When J.Jayalalitha was the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu Periyar Memorial was thrown open at Vaikom in Kerala on 31st January 1994 by the Education Minister R. Nedunchezhan under the presidentship of K.Veeramai. A portion of the place of the Memorial was donated by Janaki Ammal, wife of M.G.Ramachandran.¹⁰¹ Thereafter, M.K. Stalin, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu took initiatives to renovate this memorial of Periyar.¹⁰² In 2023, the centenary celebrations were inaugurated by Chief Ministers Pinarayi Vijayan (Kerala) and M.K.Stalin (Tamil Nadu), asserting the growing political solidarity between the two southern states. In their public addresses at a ceremony in Vaikom, both leaders emphasized the importance of building a stronger bond between Kerala and Tamil Nadu, drawing inspiration from historic lessons of movements like the Vaikom Satyagraha.

The Tamil Nadu Government also announced year long celebrations to mark the hundredth year of the Satyagraha. On 30th March 2023, the Chief Minister M.K.Stalin announced in the Assembly that 'Vaikom Award' would be established to honour individuals and organisations beyond State borders who work for the oppressed class. This would be associated with the birth anniversary of E.V.R. (17th September) which is observed as the 'Day of Social Justice' in Tamil Nadu.¹⁰³

The Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu M.K. Stalin remarked on 12th December 2024 that the historic struggle for equality at Vaikom, widely recognized as the Vaikom Satyagraha, marked the beginning of social justice movements throughout India, extending beyond the confines of Kerala. During his speech at the inauguration of the Thanthai Periyar Memorial and Periyar Library which was renovated under the supervision of the Tamil Nadu Public Works Department Minister E.V. Velu, in Vaikom, dedicated

to the Dravidian thinker E.V.R., at the cost of eight crores and 14 lakhs¹⁰⁴, Stalin noted that while significant progress has been made in social justice and economic development over the past century, much work remains to be done. The event, which also featured the participation of Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, was organized to celebrate the centenary of the Vaikom struggle, which was successfully led by E.V.R. a hundred years ago.¹⁰⁵

M.K. Stalin highlighted the contributions of various leaders, stating that If B.R. Ambedkar played a crucial role in securing temple entry for lower-caste individuals at the Amaravathi, Parvathi, and Kalaram temples, it was E.V.R. and the Self-Respect Movement that facilitated similar access for lower-caste communities in Susindiram, Madurai, Tiruvannamalai, Tiruchy, Mayiladuthurai, Triplicane, and Erode.¹⁰⁶ In 1939, the Madras government announced that all individuals entering temples would be protected, he recalled.¹⁰⁷

He emphasized the need to persist in the fight against discrimination based on caste, gender, and economic status, asserting that a transformation in people's mindsets is essential, as legal measures alone cannot address all issues. Stalin stated that while laws are important, the change in mind settings is also the critical need of the hour.

On this occasion, the Chief Minister awarded the 'Vaikom Award' offering five lakhs and a certificate of the appreciation to Kannada author Devanur Mahadeva, a Padmasree and Sahitya Academy Award winner who belonged to the Mysore District of the Karnataka State.¹⁰⁸ In his remarks, Stalin expressed, at as a proponent of Thanthai Periyar's rationalist ideals, he took pride in presenting the first 'Vaikom Award' to Devanur Mahadeva, a distinguished Kannada literary figure and relentless champion of social justice. His literary contributions have played a crucial role in addressing inequalities and promoting the pursuit of a just society.

M.K. Stalin subsequently remarked at a public gathering that the success at Vaikom was not merely a singular achievement, but rather the inception of a series of victories. Stalin commenced his address in Malayalam, highlighting the construction of a grand memorial for E.V.R. at the very location where he was barred from entry and subsequently arrested a century ago. He characterized this as a triumph for Periyar, Periyarism, and the Dravidian Movement. In concluding his remarks in Malayalam, Stalin emphasized that Vaikom represented not merely an individual victory but the initiation of a series of successes. He appealed the people for dismantling the barriers and succeeding in endeavors to do so. At any cost establishing an egalitarian society should be the motto."¹⁰⁹

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan remarked that Kerala and Tamil Nadu were mutually supporting one another on shared issues, exemplifying true cooperative federalism. He noted that the people of Kerala witnessed in the Vaikom Satyagraha a spirit of coexistence and collaboration across state lines.¹¹⁰

Among the attendees were Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, senior ministers from Tamil Nadu including Duraimurugan, E.V. Velu, and M.P. Saminathan, as well as Kerala ministers V.N. Vasavan and Saji Cherian. Other distinguished guests included K. Veeramani, president of the Dravidar Kazhagam, Thol. Thirumavalavan, president of the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi, Ayhiyaman, leader of the Adhi Thamizhar, and N. Muruganandam and Sarada Muraleedharan, the Chief Secretaries of Tamil Nadu and Kerala respectively.¹¹¹

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the Vaikom Satyagraha, which spanned 604 days from March 30, 1924, to November 25, 1925, represented a pivotal movement championing the rights to enter temples across India. This far-reaching campaign established an important benchmark for the broader struggle to secure equal access to religious sites. E.V. R. organized protests spending 114 days in Kerala and faced arrests, spending a total of 74 days in jail during the struggle.¹¹² His perspective on the movement differed significantly from Gandhi's. He saw it a broader battle against caste oppression rather than merely a reform within Hinduism. His emphasis on civil rights and equality energized the movement,

leaving a lasting legacy in India's anti-caste movement and earning the title 'Vaikom Veerer', or the 'Hero of Vaikom'. His leadership had drawn the participation of the women and activists from Tamil Nadu in a broader sense.

Although Mahatma Gandhi's role in the Vaikom Satyagraha is often highlighted, yet the movement was influenced by a variety of local leaders and activists, each with their own unique visions and strategies. Historians have differing opinions on whether Gandhi should be regarded as the leader of this movement, although his involvement did elevate it to a national prominence. Satyagrahis such as K.P. Kesava Menon frequently expressed dissent towards Gandhi's suggestions, emphasizing their independence in the struggle, as noted by scholars.

Prominent figures like T.K. Madhavan played a crucial role even prior to Gandhi's engagement, advocating for the right to enter temples as early as 1918. Madhavan's grassroots initiatives, which included dialogues with higher authorities and participation in Congress meetings, demonstrated a local strategy that predated Gandhi's influence. In contrast, Gandhi aimed to reform Hinduism from within, emphasizing moral transformation rather than direct confrontation—a position that sometimes conflicted with local leaders who sought immediate measures against caste discrimination.

The evolution of Indamthuruthi Mana at Vaikom serves as a compelling illustration of history's capacity to rectify past injustices. Upon entering the grounds of Indamthuruthi Mana today, one is immediately struck by the prominent display of a large hammer and sickle on a red-painted platform, symbolizing the significant transformations within Kerala's society. Above the historic structure, a red flag flutters, representing these societal changes. Since 1964, Indamthuruthi Mana has functioned as the headquarters for the Toddy Workers' Union, which is affiliated with the Communist Party of India (CPI). The union, established in 1943, centers around toddy tapping, a traditional occupation of the Ezhava community, which was historically regarded as "untouchable" during the era of the Vaikom Satyagraha. Over time, the descendants of Neelakandan Nambuthiri found it increasingly difficult to maintain the Mana's previous prominence and were compelled to sell portions of their estate to sustain their livelihoods. Ultimately, the Brahmin leaders of Indamthuruthi Mana opted to sell the property to finance a family wedding. The Communist Party showed interest in acquiring the estate, mobilizing funds from party members and supporters. The sale was finalized on 22nd May 1964, thereby establishing Indamthuruthi Mana as the headquarters for the toddy workers' union in Vaikom Taluk, affiliated with the Communist Party of India.

Historians have observed that participants in the Vaikom Satyagraha were driven by diverse motivations; some viewed the struggle as a quest for civic rights, while others aimed to secure temple access for all castes. This variety of objectives occasionally led to internal conflicts within the movement. Nevertheless, the Vaikom Satyagraha epitomized a multifaceted blend of activism and ideologies, showcasing a rich and complex struggle for social justice and equality.

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Dr. P. Nagoorkani

Associate Professor and Head (Rtd), Department of Modern History,
School of Historical Studies Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai.