



VAIDHYANATHA IYER'S ROLE IN THE NATIONALIST MOVEMENT AND YEOMAN SERVICES TO THE DOWNTRODDEN SOCIETY IN TAMIL NADU

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ABSTRACT

A. Vaidhyanatha Iyer was a committed nationalist who earnestly advocated for the rights of marginalized communities. He served as the President of the Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak and emulated the principles of Mahatma Gandhi and Rajaji. As a prominent figure in Madurai, he faced imprisonment on various occasions due to his participation in the Gandhian movement for national independence. In collaboration with Rajaji, the Premier of the Madras Presidency, and R.S. Naidu, the Executive Officer, he successfully facilitated the entry of untouchables into the Madurai Meenakshi Amman Temple in 1939, despite fierce opposition from Sanatanists led by N. Natesa Iyer, the President of the All India Varnasharama Sangh. Among those who entered the temple was Kakkan, who later served as a Minister in the Kamaraj Ministry of the Madras State. Following the temple entry, A. Vaidhyanatha Iyer organized a meeting near Krishna Rayar Theppakulam in Madurai to gauge public support, which attracted an audience of 20,000. During this gathering, when he sought public opinion on the temple entry issue, all attendees raised their hands in unison, indicating that the people of Madurai fully embraced the initiative. As a compassionate legislator in the Madras Legislature, he earnestly addressed matters concerning the welfare of Harijans.



KEYWORDS: A.Vaidyanatha Iyer, Rajaji, Mahatma Gandhi, Temple Entry, Harijan, Madurai, Untouchables, Depressed Classes , Khadi.

INTRODUCTION :

In 1938, a Temple Entry Propaganda Committee was constituted under the leadership of A.Vaidyanatha Iyer , By the end of June 1938 a public meeting was attended by A.Vaidyanatha Iyer in Madurai.. At the meetings held in Madurai , day in and day out electrified the City.¹ On 8th July 1939, a significant milestone was achieved in Madurai in the fight against untouchability in India. The historically marginalized communities, specifically the Nadars and Dalits, successfully gained access to the Madurai Meenakshi Amman temple, a site that had been inaccessible to them until that moment. Emphasizing the importance of this event, Mahatma Gandhi remarked on the *Harijan newspaper* that the entry of Harijans into the Madurai Temple represented a more profound victory than the opening of State temples in Travancore.² He noted that the opening of the State temples of Travancore was the prerogative of the Maharaja; however, the opening of the renowned temple of Madurai was a result of the collective will of the people. Contrary to popular belief, it was Madurai Vaidhyanatha Iyer who played a pivotal role in advocating for the inclusion of Harijans in Tamil Nadu's temples.

Arunachala Iyer, a mathematics teacher, resided with his wife, Lakshmi Ammal, in Vishnampettai, a village located in the Thanjavur District. Following his retirement, he relocated to Madurai with his eight children. His second child, Vaidhyanatha Iyer, was born on 16th May 1890. He attended Sethupathi High School, where he completed his S.S.L.C., graduating with the second highest rank in the Madras Presidency and achieving first place in Mathematics. He then enrolled in Madura College for his FA, which corresponded to the present-day 12th Standard, and earned the esteemed Neelakanta Sastri Gold Medal and the Fisher Gold Medal for his excellence in mathematics. At the age of eighteen, he married Akilandammal, who was only nine years old at the time; she later joined him in the freedom struggle and was imprisoned. Like many notable alumni, he obtained his B.A. Degree from the renowned Presidency College, Madras. During his time at Madras Presidency College, Iyer was motivated by the writings and speeches of national leaders, which inspired him to actively participate in the nationalist movement. He attended a public meeting at Triplicane beach, where Bipin Chander Pal was speaking, a location known for its role in the nationalist struggle. Upon learning of his attendance, the British Principal punished Iyer by making him stand on a bench for an entire week. Undeterred, he accepted this punishment with determination, which fortified his determination to confront the numerous challenges posed by the British in the future.

Vaidhyanathan excelled in his legal studies, achieving a distinguished state second rank. He was mentored by the renowned lawyer N.Natesa Iyer from Madurai, who guided him through the complexities of the legal field. Recognizing the significant potential of his protégé within a year, Natesa Iyer encouraged him to embark on his private practice, despite the possibility of becoming a rival.

In the courts of Madurai, Tirunelveli, and Pudukottai, he built a reputable name for himself, particularly among those who had been denied justice. He was among the rare lawyers who accepted only legitimate cases and demonstrated a keen sensitivity to the needs of the community. His legal expertise and the references he cited earned him praise from the judges. Consequently, he quickly became one of the most sought-after lawyers in that region of the state. The influx of cases led to a substantial increase in his income, a significant portion of which he dedicated to the freedom struggle. When Gandhi announced the Satyagraha in 1920, Iyer contemplated leaving his legal career to become a full-time activist. However, C.R.Das advised him to maintain his practice while participating in party activities as a part-time contributor.³

During Gandhi's second visit to Madurai in 1921-1922, following his engagements in Cuddalore, he adopted a simple four-yard dhoti to resonate with the impoverished. It was during this visit that Iyer developed a close relationship with Mahatma Gandhi, inspiring numerous young individuals to engage in the nationalist movement, including initiatives for Khadi promotion, empowerment of the Depressed Classes, and the prohibition of alcohol. Iyer played a pivotal role in introducing the hand-spinning wheel for the production of Khadi in Madurai and its surrounding villages. He travelled extensively to various villages, providing guidance on Khadi production. Alongside young volunteers, he personally transported Khadi garments to promote their sales. Consequently, in 1924, Madurai District emerged as the leading region in the state for Khadi manufacturing and sales. Varadarajulu Naidu, who was the President of the Congress committee at that time, honoured him with a silver charka. Despite facing numerous challenges, Iyer persevered in his commitment to the Khadi movement.⁴

The announcement of 'Poorna Swaraj' at the Lahore Congress, coupled with the British Government's refusal to ease the salt tax, prompted Gandhi to declare the salt satyagraha. In response, Rajaji hurried to Madurai to seek Iyer's advice on organizing a similar movement in the southern region. It was during this meeting that they resolved to replicate the Dandi March from Trichy to Vedaranyam. Initially, Rajaji considered Kanyakumari, the point where the oceans converge, as a potential starting point. However, since the Congress had decided against conducting Satyagraha in non-native states, Kanyakumari, being part of Travancore, was deemed unsuitable. Vedaratnam Pillai, an active member of the Congress and a resident of Vedaranyam, persuaded Rajaji that his hometown would be the ideal location. Rajaji concurred, noting the presence of convenient salt marshes at the Agasthiampalli salt factory near Vedaranyam. Additionally, Pillai, being a licensee of the salt factory, possessed knowledge of salt production. Iyer while addressing volunteers instructed them about the

non-violent methods to be used in the salt campaign. At the end of the meeting, eighteen volunteers were selected from Madurai for taking part in the Vedaranyam Satyagraha. Rajaji visited Madurai and inspected the eighteen volunteers selected for the satyagraha.⁵ At a conference held in Vellore, Rajaji was unanimously elected as the president of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee (T.N.C.C.), with T. S. S. Rajan serving as secretary. Prominent members of the committee included A. Vaidyanatha Iyer, Panthulu Iyer, Swaminatha Chetty, Lakshmipathi, and N. S. Varathachariyar. Meanwhile, the party headquarters was relocated from Madras to Trichy. A month later, Rajagopalachari planned to launch a protest similar to the Dandi March along the eastern coast to produce salt at Vedaranyam in the Thanjavur District of Madras Presidency. The details of the march were carefully devised by Iyer and executed by T.S.S. Rajan and Vedaratnam Pillai.⁶

Following the march, Rajaji was apprehended; however, as per Rajaji's counsel, Iyer refrained from participating in the march and instead observed the events. The government enacted Section 144 throughout India. Subsequently, Iyer and other leaders persisted with the satyagraha, disregarding the prohibition. While Iyer was addressing the audience, the police attempted to disperse the gathering by assaulting them with batons. Iyer was forcibly removed from the stage, attacked, and dragged for a distance of approximately 200 meters along the ground. He was then taken to Trichy jail and was released only after the Gandhi-Irwin pact was signed in 1931.⁷

In 1932, the Civil Disobedience Movement was launched, and Madurai faced a shortage of funds for its organization. Iyer stepped into cover all expenses from his personal savings. He took the lead in campaigns against liquor and the boycott of foreign goods. Following Gandhi's arrest, widespread protests erupted across the nation, and Iyer played a prominent role in addressing these gatherings. He was subsequently attacked, arrested, and sentenced to a year in Vellore jail, along with a fine of 500 rupees.⁸ When he declined to pay the fine, the government seized his car and put it up for auction. However, due to Iyer's deep connection with the people of Madurai, no one came forward to purchase the car, leaving the authorities embarrassed. This incident illustrated the profound affection the residents of Madurai held for him. Prior to his imprisonment in Vellore, aware of the financial constraints hindering the protests, he coordinated with friends to sell some of his wife's jewelry to fund the movement. They managed to pawn it for Rs. 7000 at that time, allowing the agitation to persist, and he later reclaimed the items. The economic situation worsened during the Second World War, adversely affecting the production of handmade Khadi, which plunged many families into poverty. Iyer utilized his earnings to provide food and medical assistance to those struggling families, continuing his support until their businesses returned to stability.⁹

When Jinnah advocated for a separate nation for Muslims, tensions between Hindus and Muslims escalated, leading to riots. Nehru was detained in Kashmir, prompting protests in Madurai, where armed groups of both communities gathered at the intersection of West and South Masi streets. In response to this volatile situation, Iyer bravely positioned himself between the two factions, unarmed and imploring them to cease hostilities. He even prostrated himself on the ground, demonstrating his humility and stature, which ultimately helped to defuse the situation and prevent a significant calamity.

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While the struggle for independence was important to him, Iyer was particularly passionate about eradicating untouchability and fostering unity among different religions, despite his upbringing in a traditional family. He was actively engaged in the welfare of Harijans even before the establishment of the Harijan Samarak Sangh and other reformist groups. A significant milestone in his efforts was the entry into the Madurai Meenakshi Amman temple. Following a 1932 agreement between Ambedkar and Gandhi in Poona, which aimed to promote the rights of Depressed Classes¹¹, Iyer, who was already a staunch advocate for this cause, eagerly took on the responsibility of organizing meetings across the southern districts with the help of his associates. On 24th May 1936 and 12th November 1936, the Maharaja of Travancore issued two proclamations which removed entry restrictions for Harijans and other marginalized communities in public places in his State.¹²

Inspired by the king's proclamation, Iyer launched a campaign throughout the Madras Presidency advocating for Harijans' access to temples. He traversed the state, conducting public meetings, which drew the ire of high-caste Hindus.

M.N.R. Subburaman, known as 'Madurai Gandhi' or 'Tamilnadu Gandhi', from the high-caste Saurashtra community, was a significant ally in this endeavor. Alongside him, G. Ramachandran, Somasundarabharathi, Manakkal Pattabiramaier, Cholavandan Chinnasamy Pillai, and Mattapparai Venkatrama Iyer all contributed diligently to the temple entry movement in Madurai.¹³

In June 1939, at the temple entry conference convened in Madurai, Iyer proclaimed that the entry into the temple would indeed take place. This announcement elicited a range of reactions, both supportive and opposing, including from Vaidhyanatha Iyer's senior, Natesa Iyer, who ultimately ostracized him. Some influential members of the warrior caste threatened to gather outside the temple to forcibly obstruct the entry. When Iyer reached out to Rajaji regarding these concerns, he was encouraged to proceed with Rajaji assuring him that Thevar would look after it. No concern was necessary. True to Rajaji's words, Thevar declared that he would be present at the entrance of the Meenakshi Amman Temple and those who attempted to prevent the Harijans from entering might come and confront him. He would respond to them. No one dared to take up the challenge.¹⁴ It was said that Muthuramalinga Thevar had sent twenty men of his caste to give protection to the participants of the temple entry.¹⁵ Rajaji, further assured to Iyer that He would give him legislation within eight days.¹⁶ The Meenakshi Amman Temple Trust, along with its Executive Officer R.S. Naidu, endorsed this reform and extended their support to Iyer. On 8th July 1939, Vaidyanatha Iyer entered the Meenakshi Temple in Madurai, accompanied by L. N. Gopalasamy and six untouchable persons. P. Kakkan (who later became a minister in Kamaraj Ministry), Muruganandam, Chinniah, Purnalingam, Muthu, and Virudhunagar Shanmuga Nadar.¹⁷ This activity faced strong opposition from upper-caste Hindus, and E.V. Ramasami Periyar, as a critic too remarked that it was merely a political spectacle aimed at countering the Justice Party in the forthcoming elections.¹⁸

During this period, Rajaji served as the Premier of the Madras Presidency. He hoped that the temple entry movement would invigorate a significant societal transformation. He successfully piloted the temple entry bill in the Madras Legislative Assembly and it became an Act in September 1939.¹⁹ Following the Meenakshi Amman temple, the movement for temple entry extended to the Azhagar temple, as well as the Thiruparankuntram, Thiruvaramangam, Pazhani, and Srivilliputhur temples before the end of December 1939.²⁰ Rajaji provided substantial support to Iyer, contributing significantly to the success of the temple entry movement. This movement was a pivotal reform in the fight against untouchability, and Iyer's efforts in this regard were commendable, as he faced numerous challenges to achieve his goals. According to the British government's report, Madurai, described as a stronghold of orthodoxy, exhibited a willingness to consider the temple entry reforms advocated by Gandhiji at that time.²¹ Similarly, the Vaikom agitation was spearheaded by an Untouchability Abolition Committee, which emerged following the Kakinada Congress resolution. This committee included notable figures such as K. Kelappan (convener), T.K. Madhavan, Kurur Nilakantan Namboothiri, T.R. Krishnaswami Iyer, and K. Velayudha Menon.²² E.V. Ramasami later participated in the Kerala agitation as a congressman, accompanied by his wife Nagammal from the Madras Presidency.²³ In 1940, when Gandhi initiated the Individual Satyagraha, Iyer took the lead in Madurai, similar to Anjalai in Cuddalore and Rukmani Lakshmi pathi in Madras. His wife, Akilanda Ammal, also volunteered and was subsequently arrested, serving three months in Vellore jail.

The Quit India Movement marked a significant moment when Gandhi and other prominent leaders were detained. In response, Iyer, filled with anger, organized a protest that defied the curfew, resulting in a violent confrontation where many volunteers lost their lives due to police gunfire. Subsequently, Iyer was assaulted and imprisoned in Alipore for inciting the unrest. During his incarceration, he received the tragic news of his eldest son, Sundararajan's death, which was communicated to him after a two-week delay. Upon being granted parole, he performed the last rites for his son and oversaw his daughter's marriage before returning to prison.²⁴

After six months, Iyer was released from Alipore, only to be arrested again at the jail's entrance and transferred to Thanjavur and Vellore. It was not until 1945 that he, along with many others, was released under a general amnesty.²⁵ Demonstrating remarkable resilience, Iyer resumed his legal practice and continued his protests unwaveringly until the nation attained independence.

Despite E.V.Ramasami's opposition to Iyer, he assisted him in escaping Madurai when he was besieged by angry mobs. In 1946, during a conference organized by Dravidar Kazhagam on the northern bank of the River Vaigai, some of its followers entered the Meenakshi Amman temple and made disparaging comments about the idols. This incited the local people, who pursued the Dravidar Kazhagam volunteers to the conference site and set fire to the thatched structure. The situation escalated, and the police struggled to manage the enraged crowd. Upon learning of the turmoil, Iyer swiftly arrived at the scene, calmed the public, and facilitated the safe departure of E.V.Ramasami and other leaders of Dravidar Kazhagam.²⁶

In 1946, under the encouragement of Gandhi, Sardar Patel, and Rajaji, Iyer ran for and successfully secured a seat in the Legislative Assembly representing the Madurai - Melur constituency. Despite his victory, Iyer had little interest in holding political office and subsequently declined an invitation to serve as a minister in the Tamil Nadu government. From 1946 to 1951, Vaidyanatha Iyer dedicated himself to the constituents as a Member of the Legislative Assembly (M.L.A.) for Melur.²⁷ He initiated the establishment of numerous Public Health Centres to address the recurring issues of plague and cholera. Additionally, he founded educational institutions across various villages and facilitated the digging of wells to alleviate water scarcity throughout his constituency. During a severe drought affecting Melur, Iyer implemented the use of large water pumps to transport water from Thekkady Dam to the Vaigai River, thereby preserving thousands of acres of crops and safeguarding the lives of numerous cattle. These achievements earned him much affection and appreciation from the residents of his constituency.

His insightful and commendable perspectives on the temple entry movement, the welfare of Harijans, new governmental policies, education, women's welfare, and constitutional legislation demonstrated his integrity and commitment to the well-being of the people. As the president of the Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh since 1936, Iyer dedicated a significant portion of his time to the upliftment of Harijans.²⁸ The report produced by the Committee garnered widespread attention. He delivered notable speeches delivered by Iyer in the Madras Legislative Assembly. The establishment of the Harijan Sevalaya in Shenoy Nagar was a result of collaborative efforts among Iyer, prominent Gandhian N M R Subburaman, woman Congress leader Thayammal, and the T.V.S. group. The members of Sevalaya are among the few who honour his memory by organizing a procession annually on his anniversary. The free hostel for Harijan students provided significant benefits to many, including former Tamil Nadu Minister, P Kakkan and former Melur M.P. Maruthiah, who were inmates there.²⁹

During that period, there were no guest houses or hotels available, making Iyer's residence a permanent lodging for freedom fighters. Distinguished leaders such as Babu Rajendra Prasad, Vallabhbhai Patel, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Madan Mohan Malaviya, and Jamnalal Bajaj frequently stayed at his home during their visits to Madurai. In the face of the Vaigai floods and fire disasters in Taikalai, he took the lead in organizing volunteers. The partition of the country in 1947, which occurred on religious grounds, deeply saddened him, as he had always advocated for Hindu-Muslim unity and a *Samadharma* society. On that day, he hoisted the flag in Madurai, albeit with a sense of sorrow.³⁰

Iyer dedicated himself wholly to the freedom movement, providing unwavering support to socially marginalized individuals and the constituents he represented, often at the expense of his own health. He chose not to participate in the subsequent election held in 1952 and passed away on 23rd February 1955. ³¹In Madurai, a road bears his name, "Vaidhyanatha Iyer Salai," and two neighbourhoods are designated as West and East Vaidhyanatha Puram. The Government of India also issued a commemorative stamp in his honor. A statue was erected in front of the Madurai Meenakshi Amman Temple to commemorate his contributions. Srinivasan, the secretary of the Tamil Nadu Harijan Seva Sangam, remarked that Had it not been for Vaidyanatha Iyer's efforts to uplift the lower castes, Harijans would still be barred from entering temples. Despite his higher caste background, he remained

unconcerned about societal ostracism and committed himself to advocating for the rights of the oppressed.

A. Vaidyanatha Iyer consistently demonstrated a candid and resolute approach in advocating for his beliefs. He exhibited a remarkable willingness to diverge from traditional views, particularly regarding the concerns of the working class and depressed class, where his perspectives often contrasted with those of his contemporaries. Renowned for his selflessness and dedication to sacrifice, he was a devoted adherent of Mahatma Gandhi and Rajaji. His close association with Rajaji during the Madurai Meenakshi Temple Entry issue highlighted the trust Rajaji placed in him. Iyer was a reliable supporter of the Congress's constructive initiatives. His speeches, delivered at public gatherings and in the Madras Legislature, reflected deep earnestness and sincerity. His contributions to marginalized communities were substantial and served as a lasting testament to his commitment. Iyer was among the few individuals who successfully balanced a legal career with public service. A fervent nationalist, he actively participated in movements spearheaded by Mahatma Gandhi. Additionally, his commendable social work through the Harijan Sevak Sangh further exemplified his dedication to social causes. As a skilled lawyer, he exhibited astuteness in championing the rights of the underprivileged.

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