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Vaikom Satyagraha

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Why is in news? Remembering Vaikom satyagraha, a 100 years later

Vaikom, a temple town in the princely state of Travancore, saw the start of a **non-violent agitation on March 30, 1924** — the **first among temple entry movements** that would soon sweep across the country.

The Satyagraha foregrounded social reform amidst the growing nationalist movement, bringing Gandhian methods of protest to the state of Travancore.

Early 20th century Travancore:

The princely state of Travancore had a feudal, militaristic, and ruthless system of custom-ridden government.

The idea of caste pollution worked **not only on the basis of touch but also sight** — lower castes were forbidden entry to any “pure” place, such as temples and the roads surrounding them.

The **second half of the 19th century** saw several social and political developments ushering in unprecedented social change.

First, **Christian missionaries** converted large sections of lower castes seeking to escape the clutches of caste oppression.

Second, the **reign of Maharaja Ayilyam Thirunal Rama Varma** (1860-80) saw many progressive reforms, such as universal free primary education — including for the lower castes.

By the **dawn of the 20th century**, “there had begun to emerge among caste Hindus, Christians and even avarna Hindus, **especially Ezhavas**, a significant educated elite.

While religion and custom remained pervasive, the absolute material and intellectual deprivations of lower castes did not continue.

The **Ezhavas**, in particular, emerged as “the **most educated and organised untouchable community** in Travancore.

But **government jobs were still reserved for upper castes** — in 1918, caste Hindus, a numerical minority, held 3,800 out of 4,000 jobs in the state’s revenue department. This meant that education itself did not act as a means of socio-economic advancement.

Also, while a small Ezhava elite had started to emerge, in many cases, the ritual discrimination, overrode material and educational progress.

Take for instance the story of **Aloommoottil Channar**, an Ezhava, and one of the few people in Travancore to own a car in the early 20th century. Whenever the automobile reached a road where the Ezhavas were not allowed to pass, Channar had to get out of his vehicle and take a detour on foot.

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Road to agitation:

The issue of temple entry was first raised by Ezhava leader **T K Madhavan** in a **1917** editorial in his paper Deshabhimani.

Inspired by the success of Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement, by 1920, he began to advocate for more direct methods.

That year, he himself went beyond the restrictive notice boards on a road near the Vaikom temple.

But **upper-caste counter-agitations across Travancore** made any progress difficult — and the Maharaja, fearful of caste Hindu backlash, shied away from reforms.

It was the **entry of the Indian National Congress into the picture** that changed the dynamics.

Madhavan met Gandhi in 1921, and secured the **Mahatma's support for a mass agitation to enter temples**.

In the 1923 session of the **INC in Kakinada**, a resolution was passed by the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee to **take up anti-untouchability as a key issue**.

The committee **chaired by K Kelappan**, comprised of T K Madhavan, Velayudha Menon, K Neelakantan Namboothiri and TR Krishnaswami Iyer.

In February 1924, they decided to **launch a 'Keralaparyatanam'** in order to get temple entry and also the right to use public roads for every Hindu irrespective of caste or creed.

This was followed by a massive public messaging campaign and a **movement to open Hindu temples and all public roads to avarnas**.

Vaikom, with its revered Shiva temple, was chosen as the location for the very first satyagraha.

The Vaikom satyagraha:

It is the **first anti-caste movement**, as the pupil of the **depressed class and untouchables** were restricted from entering the temple.

This Satyagraha was to establish the rights of the oppressed classes to walk on the roads to the **Shree Mahadeva Temple in Vaikom in Kottayam district**.

The movement began on **30th March 1924**.

Madhavan and other leaders took the strategic decision to initially focus on opening up the four roads around the temple — not the temple itself — to avarnas.

They were promptly stopped and arrested. So, the next morning, another three men entered the forbidden roads and courted arrest. This went on every day — until the police stopped making arrests on April 10 and barricaded the whole area instead.

From then through September, protesters sat in front of the barricades, fasting and singing patriotic songs.

Leaders such as **Periyar**, who was arrested multiple times, and **C Rajagopalachari** came to Vaikom to offer support and lead the protesters.

Gandhiji, Chatampi Swamikal and Sree Narayana Guru supported the movement. The movement gained prominence in the whole of India and support came from far and wide.

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The **Akalis of Punjab** supported by setting up kitchens to provide food to the Satyagrahis.

Even Christian and Muslim leaders were in support of the movement. However, Gandhiji was not entirely convinced by this as he wanted the movement to be an intra-Hindu affair.

At the same time, **counter-agitations raged on**, and the satyagrahis often faced violence and intimidation from caste Hindus.

In August, 1924, the **Maharaja of Travancore died**, following which, the young **Maharani Regent, Queen Sethulakshmi Bai**, released all prisoners.

But when a large group of protesters marched to the royal palace in Trivandrum, she **refused to allow all castes access to temples**.

In March 1925, Gandhi was finally able to iron out a **compromise**: three out of the four roads surrounding the temples were opened up for everyone, but the fourth (eastern) road was kept reserved for brahmins.

This was finally implemented in November 1925, when the government completed diversionary roads that could be used by the low castes “without polluting the temple”.

Legacy and aftermath:

The Vaikom Satyagraha was a remarkable movement, which **sustained itself for over 600 days**, amidst hostile social forces, police crackdowns, and one of the worst floods in the town’s history in 1924.

The Satyagraha also saw previously unseen unity across caste lines, which was crucial for its continuing mobilisation.

But the **final compromise disappointed many**. Famously, Periyar, who had envisioned a far more spectacular outcome, fell out with Gandhi over the issue.

In **November 1936**, the Maharaja of Travancore signed the historic **Temple Entry Proclamation** which **removed the age-old ban on the entry of marginalised castes into the temples** of the state.

This, along with the demonstration of Gandhian methods of civil disobedience as effective tools of protest, was the great success of the Vaikom satyagraha.

As King wrote: “Despite its shortcomings, the Vykam Satyagraha brought untouchability, unapproachability, and unseeability to the forefront of political issues in India.”

This was the **first time** that an **organized movement was being conducted** on such a massive scale for the basic rights of the untouchables and other backward castes in Kerala.