

# Revisiting Vaikom Satyagraha:

## A Comprehensive Approach to Public Road Access

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**ABSTRACT:** The Vaikom Satyagraha in Travancore is today known as Kerala's first anti-caste movement. This movement was against the caste system as the people of depressed class and untouchables were restricted from entering the temple and near roads. The Vaikom Satyagraha proclaimed its significance almost a decade later when in November 1936, the historic Temple Entry Proclamation was passed, which lifted the age-old orthodox ban on the entry of marginalized depressed castes into the temple of Travancore.

**KEYWORDS:** *Savarna, Avarna, Road, Untouchability, Temple, Satyagraha*

### Introduction

The degree of prejudice against lower caste Hindu communities under the antiquated and rigid caste system in the formerly princely state of Kerala infuriated Swami Vivekananda enough to refer to the state as a lunatic asylum more than a century ago. You can only imagine what it would be like to be chastised for entering places of worship or simply for traveling the path that led to one if you belonged to a lower caste.

Moreover, in today's day and age, such a restriction would be incomprehensible, and a clear violation of one's human rights. Unfortunately, this was the horrifying truth in Kerala at the time. One movement, however, aimed to write the script for a historical shift that would alter Kerala's course for all time by upending an exceedingly antiquated and backward practice and building the groundwork for a more just and equal world for the next generations.

## Background of the Struggle

Kerala society has endured a great deal of hardship over the years. Kerala state was formed in 1956; earlier, it was broadly divided into Malabar (North Kerala), Cochin, and Travancore kingdoms. Early society was split into two caste-based groups called *Avarnas* and *Savarnas*. The lower caste people adhered rigidly to some caste customs. According to the existing caste system, low-caste Hindus were not permitted to enter temples in Kerala and the rest of India. Moreover, only the poorer classes had much access to the right-of-way. This chapter mostly focused on analyzing the numerous obstacles that Kerala experienced to achieve travel on right-approaching highways.

In Kerala, several caste practices were upheld for years. The untouchable population was far less than others. They are always subject to limitations and unfair treatment everywhere.<sup>1</sup> They are denied any civil rights that the wealthy elite enjoy. Disparities such as untouchability, far-off pollutants, etc., were experienced by them. They had no privilege to worship at temples. They forbid even them from utilizing public highways. Children from lower socio-economic strata did not have access to government school admissions.<sup>2</sup>

For the right to utilize the public highways for their everyday needs, there were numerous struggles in Kerala. The folks from the lowest classes led those conflicts. Every member of society can utilize a road since it is public property. Every citizen had a fundamental right to travel legally. The folks from the lowest castes made this point. The basis of the organization for all those conflicts was the debate. Most of the struggles resulted in success. Yet, not all of them were successful. Most members of the underprivileged population took part in these struggles. Yet, many of the upper castes supported the campaigns and struggles.

In December 1917, T K Madhavan, an Ezhava leader, first advanced the question of temple entry of lower caste in an editorial in the *Deshabhimani* newspaper. Between 1917 and 1920, the Travancore Assembly discussed the temple entrance of lower castes. In 1919, an assembly of around 5,000 Ezhavas demanded the right to enter all Hindu temples managed by the government.

In the Kakinada meeting of the congress party in 1923, T K Madhavan presented a report citing the discrimination that the depressed caste people were facing in Kerala. In Kerala, a committee was formed comprising people of different castes to fight untouchability. The committee chaired by K Kelappan included T K Madhavan, Velayudha Menon, K Neelakanta Namboothiri, and T R Krishnaswami Iyer. In February, they decided to launch a *Keralaparyatanam* to get temple entry and the right to use public roads for every Hindu, irrespective of their caste or creed.

The significant struggles that took place in various locations throughout Kerala included the Vaikom Satyagraha, Paliyam Satyagraha, Thirunakara at Kottayam, Suchindram, Tiruvarpu, and Kalpathy. These conflicts arose as a result of approaching equality rules. Let's get into a thorough discussion of these issues.

Vaikom in the northern part of Travancore became the center of agitation for temple entry. In November 1920, T. K. Madhavan walked beyond the regulatory notice boards on the road near the Vaikom temple in the kingdom of Travancore. He later publically announced his defiance to the Travancore administration. Part of the princely state of Travancore, Vaikom saw what might be referred to as the first-ever organized movement in Kerala for the rights of those who were regarded as "untouchables" and other socially outcast communities on a scale that was previously unthinkable.

## **Beginning of Vaikom Satyagraha**

On March 30, 1924, the Vaikom Satyagraha was launched to demand that lower castes be allowed to use the road. Notable individuals like K. P. Kesava Menon and T. K. Velayudhan led it. The road to the Mahadeva temple was closed to members of lower castes. The Vaikom Satyagraha marked the end of a protracted battle for the right to cross streets without regard to caste. A movement against untouchability was centered on the routes leading to the Mahadeva Temple of Vaikom in the Travancore Kingdom. During 1803–1844, there have been numerous attempts to circumvent the regulations prohibiting lower classes from utilizing the roadways.<sup>3</sup>

Congress and its leaders decided to protest against racial inequality in society. In 1921, representatives from Kerala attended the annual convention of the Indian National Congress in Tirunelveli. T. K. Madhavan and other notable figures raised awareness of Kerala society's social situation. The protest campaigns all began with this.<sup>4</sup>

The Indian National Congress (hereafter INC) chapter in Kakinada resolved to organize strikes against untouchability. Untouchability was acknowledged as the INC's main successful initiative for that year. Gandhi backed Kerala's anti-untouchability movements. To protest this, a segment of Congress decided to launch a civil disobedience effort. Travancore was the ideal location for the strike in Kerala. At Vaikom, Travancore, the leaders from Kerala decided to launch a movement. In Travancore, a group was organized to combat unpredictability. The key movers and shakers in the congress committee are T K Madhavan, Kurur Nilakantan Nambudiripadu, and K Velayudha Menon. The committee sought social improvement in Kerala. They started to violate the forbidden roads and troubled the Vaikom officials. At Vaikom, it resulted in a problematic scenario.<sup>5</sup>

In Travancore at the time, the progressive programs of the Congress party had not yet been widely adopted. The people of Travancore did not value the involvement in such programs. Also, the general public was not adequately informed of the criteria.<sup>6</sup>

The Travancore Royal notification of 1865, which was confirmed in 1884, stated that all castes would have access to the state's public roads. Following a legal review, the High Court of Travancore in 1887 made a distinction between public roadways and village roads, making it clear that the notifications only extended to the latter. The Vaikom temple's surrounding roadways were village roads; hence they did not need to be kept accessible to lower castes as per the notification.<sup>7</sup>

The locals in the region adopted the Civil Disobedience Movement in Vaikom and chose to lead the strike in a non-violent manner. This provided the Satyagraha with a form and a framework. The committee had the conflict well-organized. The Lord Siva Temple was located at Vaikom, and only the filthy, lower-class Hindus were allowed on the

nearby road. It was kept on each of the four sides of the roads. The right to leave these roadways was guaranteed to Muslims, Christians, and members of other religions. Only low-caste Hindus had to adhere to the limitations. In 1924, a gathering was held in Vaikom on February 29. The primary objective of the conference was to plan a march against untouchability. The Avarnas joined the protest and decided to go through the temple gate in violation of the ban on using the temple's roadways and temples for devotion. The Savarna gang took precautions to prevent lower caste attacks after the rumor circulated inside the group. They ask the police department for assistance. Ten upper caste members organized a group of five persons to launch a newspaper and write about the Vaikom strike and the issues the Savarna group was facing.<sup>8</sup>

At Vaikom in March 1924, leaders from several Keralan regions came together. A civil strike was organized by the working committee. The Vaikom strike was the sole thing the newspaper focused on. The Vaikom Satyagraha's participants were helped by educated Savarnas. They held the opinion that none of the strikes, which took place in every culture, were intended to amend or create new laws. It is done to eliminate the social ills that have riled up the entire neighborhood. On September 1921, T. K. Madhavan met Mahatma Gandhi at Tirunelveli to inform him of the difficulty of Ezhavas in Kerala. After the meet up, Gandhi send a message to him. They read Gandhi's message to kick off the strike.<sup>9</sup> Gandhi offered his support for the movement.

T. K. Madhavan, Mr. Satyavarthan, and Mr. K Sivathannu Pillai read the message aloud in Malayalam and Tamil, respectively.<sup>10</sup> C. Kesavan oversaw the attack. He has a significant impact on the strike. He gathered money to support the strike. According to Kesavan, the *Teendal Palaka* is credited with establishing caste differentiation. Only members of the upper caste had access to the barricade.<sup>11</sup>

The Vaikom Satyagraha was led by A. K. Pillai, T. K. Madhavan, Velayudha Menon, and Krishna Swami Iyer. The march had participants from every Hindu caste. There was a strong sense of nationalism and secularism in the air. To remove the obstructions, the police stopped the satyagrahis from the route. T. K. Madhavan and K. P. Kesava Menon were

taken into custody. This, in a way, assisted in drawing supporters to the Satyagraha. Gandhi expressed his gratitude to the persons who had been detained. Also, this boosted the strike's enthusiasm. Several surviving leaders attempted to move the barrier but were also taken into custody. Several local leaders from Travancore and outside the Travancore region, including K. Kelappan, were also detained. In the absence of the notable leaders, Mr. George Joseph, the congressman, assumed control of the Satyagraha. He took a different approach to lead the strike. Also detained was he. In four months, A. K. Pillai, George Joseph, and K. Velayudhan received prison sentences. Only the right to utilize the public roads was at issue in the conflict. But the strike's character helped make it more well-known. From all around India, this was supported in a variety of ways. The other non-Travancore residents took part in the strike as well. Gandhi writes to the Satyagrahis urging them to remove George Joseph's leadership. British officials were quietly observing the congress's behavior and movements. They always made an effort to treat the strike inmates well. The nonviolent strike went on as planned. The *Vandemataram* song was sung by leaders. Moreover, they scream, "Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jai."<sup>12</sup>

Many parts of India provided support and financial assistance to the Vaikom Satyagraha. The conflict drew interest from all corners of India. Congress launched the fight to win a few fundamental rights. All members of our community understood the needs of men from lower castes, and men from higher castes supported those from lower castes. These financial aids and support were included in the parts that followed.

### **Madras Government and E. V. Ramaswami Naikkar**

The financial assistance and other aid from the Madras government as well as from his side, were proclaimed by E. V. Ramaswami Naikkar. He developed close ties with Satyagraha's leaders. He increased the might of the Vaikom and Travancore hitters.<sup>13</sup> He's known for reinvigorating a historic people's movement from a sinking space- the Vaikom Satyagraha, one of the first-ever organized and successful non- non-violent movements in the country that put an end to untouchability. It's Erode Venkatappa Ramaswamy, fondly called Periyar or Thanthai Periyar in Tamil Nadu.

Periyar reached Vaikom on April 13th and took the mantle of the struggle. He was at the forefront of the struggle in each and every aspect till its successful conclusion on November 25, 1925. As per records, Sree Moolam Thirunal Rama Varma, then king of the erstwhile princely state of Travancore, had offered to hold a grand reception for EVR when he reached Vaikom. EVR, however, turned down the offer and proceeded to join the Satyagraha. Periyar, who always relentlessly fought against untouchability and Brahmin hegemony, reached out to villagers in Vaikom and gave a lease of life to the Satyagraha.

EVR, who went to Erode on September 10, was arrested on sedition charges and could not rejoin Vaikom Satyagraha. Later, he came to Varkala on March 12, 1925, and held meetings with Mahatma Gandhi and Sree Narayana Guru. He was also part of an eight-member delegation constituted to meet the Diwan of Travancore and participated in several consultations. EVR's wife Nagammal and Kannammal also took part in the Satyagraha. It was mentioned in the women's role of the Satyagraha in this article. Taking into account his contributions, EVR was also called 'Vaikom Veerar' (the hero of Vaikom). According to Sunny M Kapicadu (a Dalit activist and writer), "The importance of EVR in Vaikom Satyagraha is that he reshaped it into a citizen's rights when Gandhi viewed the struggle as an internal issue of Hindu religion." "He said that he doesn't want to see Vaikkathappan (The deity in the temple) but wants to use the streets where pigs and dogs walk freely. These words apparently changed the course of the struggle, and people came in large numbers to join it", Sunny said.

## **SNDP**

The anti-untouchability programs' involvement with Sree Narayana Guru and the SNDP will always stand out. They participated in numerous programs around Kerala, not just in Vaikom. Without the SNDP, we cannot discuss the Vaikom Satyagraha.<sup>14</sup>

The majority of the strike's participants were ezhavas. To this, Sri Narayana Guru offered his support. SNDP candidates in Mayyanadu Taluk participated in a Pidiyari fund initiative. This was intended as a rice donation to Vaikom. It facilitates the operation of Vaikom's kitchen.



The SNDP fund assisted the kitchen when free feeding was in jeopardy. The Vaikom strike was maintained with increased vigor. Guru visited Vaikom and declared his complete support for the strike. The Vaikom Ashram's office was made available to the volunteers so they could use it for Satyagraha activities.

## **Akalis**

The Akali community has always fought to introduce timely reforms in their *Guruwaras*. So, they were excited to know that a section of people in Kerala was agitating for their rights. A group of Akalis from Punjab knew about the *Satyagraha*, and they were reached at Vaikom, and they immediately set up a langar or a community kitchen to prepared food to the *Satyagrahis*. This was in free of cost. They considered this was a supportive activity. As per the instructions of the Punjab Prabanthak Shiromani Committee, the Akali group led by Lala Lal Singh and Kripal Singh had opened a community kitchen at Vaikom. Gandhi meddles in the Akalis participation, and he was not allowed to continue it. The tradition of opening *langars* goes back to the times of the third guru of the Sikhs. The guru insisted that whoever comes to visit him must be served good food. He had also opened a special eatery for that. The legends say that even emperor Akbar had to comply to this rule when he came to visit the great ascetic. The Sikhs make sure to honor this tradition by setting up community kitchens to feed people wherever they can. Anyway, in the Vaikom Satyagraha, people enjoyed the akali's food.

## **Women's Participation**

Women also played an unprecedented role in the Vaikom Satyagraha, with large-scale participation of women in the movement for the first time. Women such as Narayani Amma, Thirumalai Amma, and Nagammal Amma were at the forefront of the Satyagraha, inspiring women from all over the country to join the agitation. EVR's wife, Nagammal was participated in the struggle. The role of women in the Vaikom Satyagraha gave more strength to the Satyagraha.



## Support from Different Castes

In the conflict, Nairs and Ezhavas were of great assistance. These two organizations made a significant contribution to the strike.<sup>15</sup> It opened up a brand-new chapter in Travancore's and Kerala's comprehensive political history. Members of the Nair Service Society took part in the Vaikom Satyagraha and gave it their all.<sup>16</sup>

They ask the authority if a Christian or a Muslim is allowed to utilise the Vaikom routes. But why did the upper caste individuals forbid the lower caste Hindus from using the roads? The educated Savarnas urged that the Vaikom-related authority and the government open the highways for the lower-class Hindus. Resolutions supporting lower caste members' access to temples and their right to worship there were adopted by the SNDP *yogam* and the *Nayar yogam*. In a letter to the government on the Vaikom, the district magistrate noted that during the final week of July, an upper caste march was held at the vadayar samooham. Moreover, another meeting was held by the SNDP leadership at the *pandals*.<sup>17</sup>

Mannath Padmanabha Pillai oversaw the execution of *Savarna Jatha*. The major objective of the Jatha was to present Sethu Lakshmi Bhai, the monarch of Travancore, with a letter bearing the signatures of one lakh *Savarna* people. The Vaikom leaders received this notion from Gandhi.<sup>18</sup>

Many Hindus took part in this march. Savarnas did not take their caste or other factors into account. In the beginning of the march, thousands of people took part. Another *Jatha* was led by Emperumal Naidu and ran from Suchindram to Trivandrum by M. Sivathannu Pillai, M. P. Nair, etc. The Mannath Padmanabha Pillai's march took place on the same day as the *Jatha*. On November 12, these two *Jatha* crossed paths in Trivandrum. A note was delivered to the Rani by the leaders.<sup>19</sup>

## Government and Oppotionalist Turn Violent

As the police detained the strike's key organizers, no one was able to lead the Satyagraha in Vaikom. Vaikom was experiencing a state of stagnation. It was said that the police had adopted a new mentality. They implemented a harsh policy to intensify the strike's violence. Yet, the audience made an effort to maintain peace while on strike. The

movement's primary tenet was nonviolence. A hunger strike was led by the volunteers. Gandhi issued directions to the participants, preventing the crowd from provoking the police authority. The administration and police alter the nonviolent approach to the throng.<sup>20</sup>

With the assistance of the *Savarna*-dominated populace, the police force strengthened the repressing strategy. They assembled neighborhood *goonda* people to facilitate suppression. Pichu Aiyer, the assistant police superintendent, consistently painted volunteers as aggressive. The Satyagrahis persisted in their protest. They were singing and spinning *Charka* outside the western gate. Officers made an attempt to obstruct the activity. They didn't wait for a reason to attack the volunteers. Most of the Satyagrahis were hurt when police used the *Lathi* to attack the volunteers. The police took a combative stance against the Satyagrahis. The Satyagrahis enjoyed sympathy from the general public.<sup>21</sup>

The chief secretary of Travancore receives a letter from the commissioner of police in Travancore regarding the Vaikom Satyagraha. The letter expressed discontent with the Satyagrahis' being allowed permission to spin the *Charka*. According to the Commissioner, the District Superintendent should provide approval. Superintendent doesn't ask his views. He approaches the government secretary for assistance in the form of the law.<sup>22</sup>

Throughout the era of the British, the Travancore state served as a model state. After the missionaries arrived, they developed a strong educational system. Education was also provided to the depressed classes. After that, people were aware of the true state of society. They realized they had never experienced the independence and fundamental rights afforded by the wealthy. Hence, they sought to alter the situation. The social environment as a whole was completely against their will. The opposition of the minority *Savarna* was dissolved with the emergence of the mass *Savarna* movement in favor of the lower caste population.

The Ezhava people aimed to eliminate inequalities between the lowest caste groups. To the monarch of Travancore, they presented petitions. They desired to have the *Teendal Palakas* removed from the temple roads. The Suchindram and Thirunakara roads in Kottayam, among other places,

experienced the same issue as Vaikom. In the meantime, additional temples that practice Hinduism have been made available for worship by all castes. They don't take into account the distinction between lower and higher castes. The nearby highways and temples at Thiruvalla, Aranmula, and Chenganoor were open for worship.<sup>23</sup>

## **Gandhi's Visit**

Gandhi visited Vaikom on March 10, 1925. At Vaikom, he had conversations with those from the upper castes. It was Indanturuthi Nambaidiri he met. He served as the *Savarna* caste's chief figure. Gandhi aimed to end untouchability and unapproachability, two examples of caste practices.

He has consistently advocated for caste-neutral use of public highways. It took three hours to complete the meeting. He was accompanied by C Rajagopalachari. When Gandhi visited Vaikom, an arrangement was formed with the police commissioner of Travancore. The *Savarna* caste benefited from this. Roads were open to followers of other religions and members of lower castes alike. But, the other highways were not going to be accessible to everyone. This means that not everyone understood the deal.<sup>24</sup> The gate's three sides were finally opened for everyone. Gandhi also met with the regent Maharani to discuss about the temple entry issue.

## **End of the Struggle**

On November 23, 1925, all the gates of the temple were opened to Hindus except the eastern gate. The Travancore administration decided to open three of the Vaikom temple's gates while leaving one of them locked. This Satyagraha failed miserably. Vaikom Satyagraha was consistently defended by the Congress working committee as a successful strike. The Vaikom temple's roads weren't completely open for traffic or worship. Low-caste people's access to public transportation and roads remained a pipe dream. Only papers remained of this. Not engaged. Congress claimed that eight additional furlongs were added for the use of roads by the Vaikom government. It was thought that the congress party was a valuable one.

This was the first time an organized movement was being conducted

on such a massive scale for the fundamental rights of the untouchables and other backward castes in Kerala. The attack on Vaikom was unsuccessful. This served as the impetus for the people of Travancore to begin changing their way of thinking. In regard to the political and social climate of society, they were prepared to adopt a new attitude. All other strikes for the right to travel in the 20th century were inspired by the Vaikom Satyagraha.

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## Endnotes

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