

VAIKOM, A SATYAGRAHA, AND THE FIGHT FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Relevant for: Modern India | Topic: Indian States and Societies in 18th Century

To enjoy additional benefits

CONNECT WITH US

March 31, 2023 12:08 am | Updated 02:22 am IST

COMMENTS

SHARE

READ LATER

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi unveiling a plaque, at Vaikom, on April 20, 1975 | Photo Credit: THE HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES

The word 'Vaikom' has many associations — in Kerala, one thinks of the writer Vaikom Mohammed Basheer, the singer Vaikom Vijayalakshmi and Vaikathappan, the deity of the Vaikom temple. Many Indians will connect Vaikom with Mahatma Gandhi, while in Tamil Nadu, it conjures up the name and the image of Periyar.

But there is more to it in terms of a social movement of consequence. March 30 was a significant day in connection with Vaikom, a serene town in Kottayam, Kerala. The date also marks the commencement of the centenary year of the Vaikom temple street entry movement that was launched in 1924, and a milestone in temple entry movements in India. This non-violent movement was to end the prohibition imposed on backward communities in using the roads around the Vaikom Mahadeva temple. It was the prelude to the temple entry proclamation of Kerala in 1936. Launched by leaders in Kerala such as T.K. Madhavan, K.P. Kesava Menon and George Joseph, on the advice of Mahatma Gandhi, the movement was sustained and successfully conducted by Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, then president of the Tamil Nadu Congress, and others between 1924 and 1925.

Supported by the Kerala Congress, the committee against untouchability launched the protest on March 30, 1924, where three persons from various communities prevented from entering the temple streets were to go flag off the satyagraha. The protest sustained itself for more than one and a half years, leading to many arrests and satyagrahis being jailed. The government suddenly stopped these arrests after April 9. Instead, police ire was now directed against leaders of the protest and the leaders of Kerala who had camped in Vaikom. Their arrests created a vacuum as there was no leader to lead the protest.

This led to leaders such as Neelakandan Nampoothiri and George Joseph to request Periyar to lead the protest. There was no looking back. As a mark of appreciation, the editor of Tamil journal Navasakthi and scholar, Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundaram, or Thiru.Vi.Ka. conferred the title Vaikom Veerar (Hero of Vaikom) on Periyar.

The Vaikom movement was of many hues — as day-to-day protests, arrests, of inquiries, jail terms and agitations and attacks by orthodox Hindu traditionalists Even the Akalis from

Punjab travelled to Vaikom to supply food to the protesters. There was also the support of the higher castes for a 13-day march to the capital, a resolution in the Assembly in support of the sanchara (free entry to the streets around the temple), its defeat, and also the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi to negotiate between the government, protesters and orthodox Hindus.

Since Mahatma Gandhi insisted that it should be a local protest, requests to make it a pan-India movement failed. Backed by the government and the administration, the traditionalists caused many troubles for the satyagrahis, which included counter rallies marked by violence. The resolution for the right to sanchara was defeated in the Assembly by the open support of the traditionalists and the indirect pressure of the government. But the satyagrahis overcame the hurdles. Tamils, who went to participate in the protest, lent a helping hand to Keralites in favour of temple entry for all communities.

Tamil Nadu played a pivotal role in Vaikom Satyagraha, which symbolised a struggle by the “untouchables”. Periyar and Kovai Ayyamuthu, a firebrand leader, worked in tandem with leaders in Kerala. But they faced repressive action. There was a rally by the upper castes from Vaikom led by Mannathu Padmanabhan in favour of the protesters and another rally in the south, in support of temple entry, led by Emperumal Naidu from Nagercoil. Sivathanu Pillai, a leader from Nagercoil (which was a part of Travancore) spoke at the meeting that culminated at Trivandrum beach. There were also arrests. The names of Tamils who participated in the movement are published in my book, Vaikom Porattam (Vaikom Struggle).

So, a significant temple street entry movement that began on March 30, 1924 ended on November 23, 1925. In these 603 days, there were many important events. In the wake of new Yuva Raja ascending to the throne, 19 leaders, including Periyar, Kesava Menon and T.K. Madhavan, were released on August 30, 1924. The rally by the upper castes that began on November 1, reached Trivandrum on November 13, submitting its memorandum to the Queen regent.

The sanchara resolution that was taken up for voting in the Assembly in February 1925, was defeated by a single vote. Mahatma Gandhi, who was in Kerala, held talks with the Queen of Travancore, social reformer Narayana Guru, traditionalists and police commissioner W.H. Pitt. On November 17, the satyagrahis announced their decision to withdraw their protest. On November 23, the government of the Travancore princely state declared that people could enter three of the four streets around Vaikom temple, thus bringing the protest to an end. There was a victory celebration on November 29, 1925, presided over by Periyar.

The Kerala government has now decided to commemorate the movement by organising various cultural events. Tamil Nadu too is observing the occasion, as announced by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin in the Assembly session. A word about the Kerala government's memorial. It is not the same one that I saw in 2008, as constant refurbishments are evident. A memorial for Periyar, being maintained by the Tamil Nadu government since 1994, may be the only structure for people in Tamil Nadu to understand what happened. There is also the practice in Tamil Nadu of naming children after Vaikom — one that began in 1930.

Also read | [Satyagraha that heralded modernism in Kerala](#)

Vaikom is more than just a name of a town. It is a symbol of social justice and symbolises the eradication of caste barriers. It is one that still burns bright in history and the social justice movement.

Pazha Athiyaman is a writer, researcher and the author of ‘Vaikom Porattam’

COMMENTS

SHARE

[social issue](#) / [justice and rights](#) / [history](#) / [Kerala](#) / [Tamil Nadu](#)

BACK TO TOP

Comments have to be in English, and in full sentences. They cannot be abusive or personal. Please abide by our [community guidelines](#) for posting your comments.

We have migrated to a new commenting platform. If you are already a registered user of The Hindu and logged in, you may continue to engage with our articles. If you do not have an account please register and login to post comments. Users can access their older comments by logging into their accounts on Vuukle.

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

crackIAS