

100 Years Of Vaikom Satyagraha

Why In News

- **100th year of the historic Viakom Satyagraha** that marks a milestone in the fight against untouchability in Kerala's history. It not only challenged caste oppression but also the social norms. Vaikom Satyagraha, the non-violent agitation that **lasted for 603 days** was held for the right of backward communities to travel through the public road near the Vaikom Mahadeva Temple at Kottayam district in Kerala.



Vaikom Satyagraha

- **Vaikom, a temple town** in the princely state of **Travancore**, saw the start of a non-violent agitation on the 30th of March 1924 and ended on the 23rd of November 1925.
- The agitation was supported by **prominent leaders like** Sree Narayana Guru, Mannathu Padmanabhan, E. V. Ramasamy Naicker, T. K. Madhavan, K. Kelappan K. P. Kesava Menon, etc.
- The satyagraha **foregrounded social reform** amidst the growing nationalist movement, bringing Gandhian methods of protest to the state of 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.
- 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 caste 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 **Aloomootil 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.
- The issue of temple entry was first raised by Ezhava leader T K Madhavan in a 1917 editorial in his **paper Deshabhimani**.

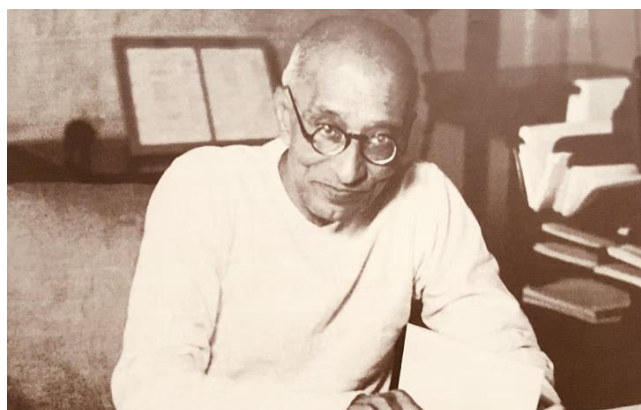


- Inspired by the success of Gandhi's **Non-Cooperation Movement, by 1920**, he began to advocate for more direct methods. That year, he himself went beyond the restrictive notice boards on a road near the Vaikom temple.
- But upper-caste counter-agitations across Travancore made any progress difficult — and the Maharaja, fearful of caste Hindu backlash, shied away from reforms.
- **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.
- 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.
- 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.
- Early morning on **March 30, 1924**, “a Nair, an Ezhava and a Pulayu, dressed in Khaddar uniforms and garlanded, and followed by a crowd of thousands, attempted to use the roads”, Jeffrey wrote.



- 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.



- 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”. The last satyagrahi was recalled from Vaikom on November 23, 1925.



Conclusion

- 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 Vykom satyagraha brought untouchability, unapproachability, and unseeability to the forefront of political issues in India.”

