

# Remembering the Foot Soldiers of Vaikom Satyagraha

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Going beyond the celebration of Gandhi and his role in the Vaikom  
Satyagraha movement, Athira Sreedevi Prasenan discusses how the  
movement was heavily influenced by the Satyagraha volunteers and  
their politics, making the movement more dynamic as well as  
contradictory in its ideology and vision.

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It is worthwhile to ponder, while introspecting about the Satyagraha, whether history did justice to their struggles by forgetting to remember them. Despite significant contributions of activists from Bahujan contexts as well as activists from the Tamil country, Vaikom Satyagraha is often aligned to the figurehead of Gandhi. Although Gandhi's presence did nationalise the movement to a large extent, it is important to note how community leaders and activists such as T K Madhavan, K P Kesava Menon and Periyar catapulted the Satyagraha to a momentous struggle for equality and civic rights, with their leadership and vision. Most importantly, the *Satyagrahis* who threw their lives into the movement as volunteers were often forgotten despite their sacrifice. The narrative of a single leader and a mass of unflinching followers hardly bear any truth for a movement that was as dynamic and prolonged as the Vaikom Satyagraha.

A hundred years back, the quaint little town of Vaikom was placed in the political map of the country when the people rose up to struggle for the rights of the downtrodden. The Vaikom Satyagraha, which began on 30th March 1924 under the aegis of the Unapproachability Eradication Committee (*Ayithocchadana* Committee), constituted by the Kerala chapter of Indian National Congress, witnessed a close collaboration between the political activists of the states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. However, despite being an iconic political struggle that united two states in their pursuit of eradicating untouchability and initiating social reform in national politics, Vaikom Satyagraha remained elusive in terms of its origins, motives, strategies, outcomes and consequences. While early narratives<sup>1</sup> about the Satyagraha focused more on the involvement of Gandhi and his methods in Vaikom, the later narratives tried to document the myriad incidents and actors which shaped the struggle. Consequently, more participants of the Satyagraha are now visible in the posters, pamphlets and discourses around the centenary celebrations of the Satyagraha. However, since the narrative is often skewed towards Gandhi and other prominent figures even when one is evaluating the success or failure of the Satyagraha, the story of the *satyagrahis* – the volunteers who threw their lives into the struggle as its foot soldiers – is often forgotten. In this article, I attend to the stories of these volunteers who acted on their impulses, radical or conservative, and shaped the Vaikom Satyagraha as a dynamic movement that was often provocative and sometimes overtly submissive.

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<sup>1</sup> Prominent among these works were Richard B Gregg's *The Power of Nonviolence* (New York: Schocken Books, 1934), Krishnalal Sridharani's *War without Violence: A study of Gandhi's Method and its Accomplishments* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1939), Joan V Bondurant's *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), and Mark Juergensmeyer's *Gandhi's Way: A Handbook of Conflict Resolution* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).



A sculpture of the Satyagraha volunteers which was part of the old Satyagraha Museum at Vaikom (Photo: Abhijith Prasenan)



The Kattikkunnu Public Library close to Vaikom has come up with a play titled 'Amachady Thevan' on the occasion of the centenary of Vaikom Satyagraha, as announced in the hoarding put up in front of its office. (Photo by the author)

Even in the great deluge of 1924 which wreaked havoc all over Travancore, the Satyagrahis held onto their struggle standing neck deep in the flood waters. They persisted for twenty months, braving blind authorities, bashing from upper castes, and atrocious backlashes from the police, until it was officially withdrawn on 30th November 1925 after a compromise was made between Gandhi and W H Pitt, the then Police Commissioner of Travancore. Although the Satyagraha was only partially successful, it initiated a national discussion on caste-related excesses.

### The unsung heroes

However, despite these stellar contributions towards the making of the Vaikom Satyagraha, there were times when the movement turned disastrous to the ordinary Satyagrahis. For instance, when Amachady Thevan, the Pulaya Satyagrahi from Amachady, an islet off Poothotta near Vaikom, joined the movement as one of the Satyagrahis who were close to Narayana Guru and T K Madhavan, he was smeared with quick lime in his eyes by the Satyagraha's opponents. The lime not only caused a loss of vision but it also resulted in his painful death many years later. Such stories of sacrifice for the sake of equality show how the oppressed had to grapple with the possibility of losing their life much more than other savarna satyagrahis. Similarly, the story of how A K Govindan Channar refused to leave Vaikom even after hearing the news of his son's death also reveals how many Dalit and lower-caste figures were ready to brave their lives for the sake of the movement.

Despite the later research interests<sup>2</sup> on Vaikom Satyagraha, the struggle has often been attributed to Gandhi and his influence in popular writings. For example, Sadhu M P Nair, a Satyagrahi who chronicled events in the Vaikom Satyagraha from 1924 to 1925, describes Gandhi as the "spiritual emperor" of the Satyagraha<sup>3</sup>. However, if one looks into the narratives on the movement, there is ample evidence to suggest that the Satyagraha leaders did not see Gandhi as an emperor. Instead, they disobeyed Gandhi's suggestions when they wanted to and followed their own paths in the struggle. For example, when the initial delegation of the two Brahmins from Vaikom reached the Andheri ashram and impressed upon Gandhi that the roads around the temple were owned by the Devaswom, Gandhi wrote to K P Kesava Menon and asked him to halt the Satyagraha and engage in conversations with the savarna<sup>4</sup> Hindus. However, K P Kesava Menon disagreed with Gandhi and wrote back to him to state that the roads around the temple were public roads that were owned by the government and therefore there was no reason to stop the Satyagraha<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the recent academic works on Vaikom Satyagraha critically take on the involvement of Gandhi in the Satyagraha as well as debate on the success or failure of the Satyagraha, carrying forward the efforts of T K Ravindran in his book *Vaikkam Satyagraha and Gandhi* (Trichur: Sri Narayana Institute of Social and Cultural Development, 1975). Mary Elizabeth King's *Gandhian Non Violent Struggle and Untouchability in South India: The 1924-25 Vykom Satyagraha and the Mechanisms of Change* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015) and Pazha Athiyaman's *Vaikom Satyagraham* (Kottayam: DC Books, 2023) are pertinent in this regard.

<sup>3</sup> Sadhu M P Nair, *Vaikkam Satyagraha (1924-25)* (Tripunithura: Centre for Heritage Studies, 2016) 3, The translation of the phrase is mine.

<sup>4</sup> The word 'savarna' denotes the upper castes who occupy the four varnas of the caste system, namely Brahmins, Ksatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. On the contrary, 'avarna' denotes those outside this four-fold division, which includes the Dalits and the lower castes in the Kerala context.

<sup>5</sup> Though Gandhi's letter did not reach K P Kesava Menon directly, his reply was based on the letter's details published in *The Hindu* on 2-4-1924. See the letter reproduced in E Rajan's *Vaikkom Sathyagraham* (Kozhikode: Mathrubhumi Books, 2016), 127-129.



The Vaikom Sathyagraha Smarak Gandhi Museum, by the Department of Archives of the Kerala Government and the Vaikom Municipality, which was inaugurated in January 2020. (Photo by the author)



A painting of Periyar and George Joseph on the outer walls of the Vaikom Sathyagraha Smarak Gandhi Museum (Photo by the author)

pealed for funds and support. The Satyagraha, at this point, had more women participation. T K Madhavan's wife Narayani Amma had also come to Vaikom to exhort women to participate en masse in the Satyagraha. Besides Periyar, many other Congress activists and fiery orators from the Tamil country like Ayyamuthu Gounder, Emperumal Naidu and Varadarajulu Naidu also arrived at Vaikom. Emperumal Naidu was the captain of the southern wing of the *savarna jatha* (procession) which met the Maharani Regent Sethu Lakshmi Bhai and presented her with a memorial in Thiruvananthapuram.

Throughout the period of unrest and arrests, one could argue that the financial and political help from the Tamil country and beyond kept the Satyagraha alive. Even the group of Akalis from Punjab, who had arrived at Vaikom with the mission to run a free kitchen, were instrumental in feeding around two thousand people per day, a large number being Satyagraha volunteers. Resources and people from every region of India flowed towards Vaikom when the struggle began to gain attention and fame. Although Gandhi's antagonism towards accepting help from outside Travancore as well as his aversion to allowing participation of Christians, Akalis and Muslims in the Satyagraha made many volunteers leave Vaikom, leaders like George Joseph could resist Gandhi's reprimand and invite Periyar.

Going beyond Gandhi, if one explores the historical roots of the Satyagraha, one can also see how the struggle involved the efforts of community organisations. For example, the satyagraha was already active for a year even before Gandhi's visit to Vaikom in 1925. Early contributions to the movement therefore show how the local leaders who led the struggle were ahead of Gandhi in terms of vision and politics. The Ezhava activist, T K Madhavan for example, took the position that all Hindu castes should have temple-entry rights as early as 1918. While his efforts at changing the princely authority's minds for the betterment of lower castes ended in a conflict with the then Diwan T. Raghavaiah in 1921, who shouted at him to take the idea outside of Travancore, Madhavan was clever enough to follow through with this suggestion and make such a move in Tirunelveli (in present-day Tamil Nadu) where he met Gandhi<sup>6</sup> and convinced him about the right to temple entry. Furthermore, Madhavan, along with K P Kesava Menon and K Kelappan, also attended the Kakinada session of the Indian National Congress in 1923 and placed the discussions on untouchability at the center of national politics. Since the Congress was also at the cusp of a change, they agreed with Madhavan's resolution of establishing *Ayithocchadana* Committees in the provincial Congress Committees for the eradication of untouchability. According to Mary Elizabeth King (2015), "the measures taken by the Kakinada Congress had more resonance in what is today Kerala than in other places, not just because the problem of untouchability was worse there, but because there were already local movements that had gained critical public awareness"<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> The details of his meeting with Gandhi on 24th September 1922 in Tirunelveli, printed in his newspaper *Deshabhiman* in its issue dated 1st October, was reproduced as "Mahatma – T K Madhavan conversation" in *Vaikom Satyagraha Rekhakal (Vaikom Satyagraha Records)*, ed. P C Menon and P K Harikumar, (Kottayam: Publication Division of Mahatma Gandhi University and the Vaikom Municipality, 1977), 27-32.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Elizabeth King, *Gandhian Non Violent Struggle and Untouchability in South India: The 1924-25 Vykom Satyagraha and the Mechanisms of Change* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), 89.



The statue of T K Madhavan in the statue junction at Vaikom, with the Thanthai Periyar Memorial of the Tamil Nadu Government in the backdrop. (Photo by the author)

When Gandhi actively conferred with Devan Neelakantan Nambiathiri and the delegation of savarna Hindus of Vaikom, he emphasised the absence of scriptural authority in Hinduism on observing pollution in public roads. The entire conversation was premised on the authority of sources in the practice of untouchability. While the Nambiathiri and the savarnas argued that the custom being practiced in Kerala is based on Sankaracharya's text, Gandhi wanted the text to be ratified by the learned priests in Kashi. He also offered to hold a referendum in Vaikom to see if the savarnas were accepting towards opening the roads around the temple. Though the savarnas did not oppose it in spirit, they wanted the referendum to be held only among the temple-going public. Finally, the solution that Gandhi offered involved the setting up of a board of three arbitrators appointed by both parties to decide on the question of temple-entry, with the Diwan as the umpire. Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, the President of the Hindu Maha Sabha, was chosen as Gandhi's representative-arbitrator to the board. In this sense, Gandhi's approach to eradicating untouchability was embedded within the tenets of the religion which was seen as problematic by many.

### Solidarity from the Tamil country

Among the other foot soldiers of the movement, Periyar E V Ramaswami Naicker was the only activist who was arrested more than once for his participation in the Satyagraha<sup>15</sup>. George Joseph, the Madurai-based barrister, invited Periyar, who was the President of the Tamil Nadu Pradesh Congress Committee, to take the lead when the movement had come to a lull. The coming over of Periyar was a significant milestone for the Satyagraha. Through his brilliant oratory skills, he raised people's participation and spirit at many places in Travancore and the British Indian pockets around it. It was through his arrests and oration that he earned the epithet 'Vaikom Veerar' (the Hero of Vaikom). One could argue that it was Vaikom that changed Periyar's political outlook and compelled him to differ from Gandhi's social reform programmes. The arrival of Periyar also led to a close collaboration between Malayali and Tamil political activists. For instance, when Periyar was jailed, his wife Nagammal and sister S R Kannammal took over the movement and ap-

<sup>15</sup> Athiyaman, *Vaikom Satyagraham*, 13.



The Indamthuruthi Mana, where Gandhi had an extended discussion with Devan Neelakantan Nambiathiri and the savarna Hindus of Vaikom in its portico, had been renovated and now hosts the office of the Toddy Tappers' Union of the Communist Party of India (CPI).

(Photo by the author)

Apart from its proximity to Cochin princely state, local historians ascribe another strong reason for the successful germination of a satyagraha against unapproachability. For instance, when members of the *Ayithochadana* Committee reached Vaikom on 29th February 1924, after visiting many villages of Travancore, they witnessed a large meeting of the Pulaya Dalits (*Pulayamahayogam*)<sup>8</sup> in the afternoon. After addressing this gathering, they marched to the Congress venue and attended the Congress meeting. Towards the end of the Congress meeting, K P Kesava Menon emphatically declared that there would be a procession of the lower castes including the Ezhavas and the Pulayas through the prohibited roads around the temple, the next morning. However, since savarna activists along with the local authorities had urged him to reconsider it, the decision to conduct an immediate procession was set aside for the time being. According to Dalitbandu N K Jose, a historian based at Vaikom, the *Pulayamahayogam* was ready to do something bigger when the Committee members arrived and announced the decision to postpone the march. This, according to Jose, dampened their spirit<sup>9</sup>. Jose has also speculated that the *Pulayamahayoham* was commemorating the local memory of an incident that happened a hundred years before the Vaikom Satyagraha, wherein the lower castes who attempted to march through the roads around the temple were hacked to death by the King's men. Such accounts reveal how the movement was indicative of the caste conflicts within different communities that were eager to participate in the Satyagraha.

### Movement for civic rights or temple entry?

Was the Vaikom Satyagraha a movement that pre-empted the temple entry of all castes? Or was it simply a struggle to exercise the right to use the roads around the temples by lower castes? This distinction between temple entry and civic rights was a crucial concern for the leadership of the Satyagraha. For George Joseph, a barrister and Congress activist, the movement was a question of civic rights. It was about making public

<sup>8</sup> A summary report of the happenings following *Pulayamahayogam* is included in pages 33-34 of *Vaikom Satyagraha Rekhakal*.

<sup>9</sup> Dalitbandu N K Jose, "Preface to the first edition" in *Vaikom Satyagraham: Oru Prathelika (Vaikom Satyagraha: An inscrutable question)* (Vaikom: Hobby Publications, 2014), 27-41.

roads open to all tax-paying people alike. In this sense, Joseph wanted the discussion on temple-entry to be set aside. However, for Madhavan and his allies in the Ezhava reform movement, temple-entry for all castes was significant and necessary.

Even during the Madhavan-Gandhi conversation in Tirunelveli, Gandhi had urged Madhavan to perform civil disobedience by stoically entering temples in batches, without assembling a crowd for the purpose or using violence. Narayana Guru, the spiritual figure from the Ezhavas, on the other hand had a complicated stance on the same issue. For example, in an interview to *The Hindu* on 5th June 1924, Narayana Guru suggested that the protesters should ‘scale over the barricades, and not only walk along the prohibited roads but enter all temples including the Vaikom temple’. In the same interview, he also said that ‘the prohibited classes should enter the temple *Madapilli* and sit with others to dine’, and make it ‘practically impossible for anyone to observe untouchability’. In the interview given to *The Western Star* on 19th July 1924, however, he took a different stance where he insisted that he never urged his followers to agitate. He also said that although there might be justice in the demand, he does not approve of the method of *kshobham* (agitation). However, Nitya Chaitanya Yati, a disciple of Narayana Guru, reveals in his Foreword to the first edition of Dalitbandhu N K Jose’s ‘*Vaikom Satyagraham: Oru Prahelika*’ that Gandhi had sent Vinobha Bhave to Narayana Guru with the mission to request him to advise his followers to not attempt temple-entry. In his response, Guru had asked Bhave, a Vaishnavite, whether Vaishnavites would agree to such demands of giving up on the magnificent *darshan* of the deity for nothing. Bhave returned furious<sup>10</sup>.

## Gandhian overtures

Although Gandhi did not start the Vaikom Satyagraha, he was unwillingly drawn to it when he agreed to act in an advisory position for the movement<sup>11</sup>. As I mentioned earlier, contrary to perceptions,

<sup>10</sup> This incident was shared with Nitya Chaitanya Yati by Nataraja Guru, the disciple of Narayana Guru who was entrusted with seeing off Bhave for his return journey.

<sup>11</sup> George Gheverghese Joseph asserts in *George Joseph: The Life and Times of a Kerala Christian Nationalist* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2003), 159, as cited in King, *Gandhian Non Violent Struggle and Untouchability in South India*, 94.

the Vaikom Satyagraha was not always directly under the command of Gandhi. At times, Gandhi’s directions would ruffle the feathers of on-the-ground Satyagrahis, and were sometimes not obeyed by the protesters. This was famously the case with George Joseph<sup>12</sup>. Joseph was asked to keep away from the Satyagraha’s leadership because he was a Christian. Since Gandhi wanted only Hindus to be involved in the Satyagraha, as he perceived the movement as the battle for a reformed Hinduism, this was a point of contention among his contemporaries.

This distinction in perspective continued with other interactions as well. For instance, Gandhi’s approach involved the reformation of Hinduism from within so that it could improve the lives of the lower castes. Although Madhavan managed to distort Gandhi’s reference point from the *Panchama-s* in British India to the Ezhavas in princely Travancore in his initial conversation with Gandhi<sup>13</sup>, Gandhi held on to his initial stance. In his public speech to Pulayas and Ezhavas that he gave at the Satyagraha ashram in Vaikom, Gandhi explained how he imagined a transformation for the lower-caste communities. That they would stop eating flesh, give up drinking, bathe and comb hair everyday, wash clothes, worship God by chanting Ram, spin and wear *khaddar*, and educate the children by sending them to schools was central to his imagination<sup>14</sup>. Since Gandhi’s instructions shaped the nature of the Satyagraha, the agency of the lower castes was often reduced to appease the savarnas and invoke sympathy towards their plight. The upper caste body also became a site of this spectacle of suffering when volunteers from both upper, lower and middle rung of the caste spectrum offered themselves as volunteers within the Satyagraha struggle, while Gandhi vouched for the resultant ‘conversion of minds’ as the vehicle of social transformation.

<sup>12</sup> See George Gheverghese Joseph’s well-acclaimed biography, *George Joseph: The Life and Times of a Kerala Christian Nationalist* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> As Gandhi was skeptical of Madhavan’s sense of urgency on temple entry during their initial meeting, Gandhi advised Madhavan to focus on achievable targets like access to public wells and public schools. Madhavan responds with an observation that Gandhi is speaking with the plight of *Panchama-s* of British India in his mind. The *Panchama-s* denoted the untouchables in British India. He convincingly placed on record the remarkable achievements of his community, highlighting the strides they made in education, employment and spirituality in Travancore. Gandhi was indeed convinced that the Ezhavas were ripe for temple entry. See *Vaikom Satyagraha Rekhakal*, 29-30.

<sup>14</sup> As reproduced in *Selected Documents on Vaikom Satyagraha*, ed. S. Raimon, (Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala State Archives Department, 2006), 100-103.