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Vaikom Satyagraha: The fight for social justice

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Why is in news? On March 30, 1924, in the temple town of Vaikom in the princely state of Travancore, a non-violent agitation started, marking the beginning of “temple entry movements” across the country that lasted for 604 days (20 months) from March 30, 1924 to November 23, 1925 marked the dawn of temple entry movements across India.

Background

Precisely a century ago, Kerala’s Vaikom town which was then in the princely state of Travancore became the epicentre of a historic non-violent movement against untouchability and caste discrimination.

Back then, the people of the oppressed classes especially the Ezhavas, were prohibited from walking on the four roads surrounding the Vaikom Mahadeva temple. Spearheaded by Congress leader T.K. Madhavan, who himself was an Ezhava, an agitation was launched against this social injustice.

In 1923, Madhavan presented the issue as a resolution at the Kakinada meet of All India Congress Committee.

Subsequently, it was taken up by the Congress Untouchability Committee formed by the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee in January 1924.

Madhavan, K.P. Kesava Menon who was the then secretary of Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee and Congress leader and educationist K. Kelappan (also known as Kerala Gandhi) are considered the pioneers of the Vaikom Satyagraha movement.

The beginning of the movement

Around 7.30 am on March 30, 1924, the Satyagrahis walked in procession towards the forbidden public roads.

They were stopped 50 yards away from the place where a board (first put up in 1905) cautioning the oppressed communities against walking on the roads, was placed.

Dressed in khadi and wearing khadi caps, three young men namely Govinda Panikkar, a Nair, Bahuleyan, an Ezhava and Kunjappu, a Pulaya, marched ahead, defying the prohibitory orders.

The police who asked about their castes, stopped them when they answered. In protest, the three men sat on road and were arrested.

Then on, every day, three volunteers from three different communities were sent to walk on the prohibited roads. Within a week, the leaders of the movement were all arrested.

Invitation to ‘Periyar’

George Joseph, a Congressman hailing from Kerala and an advocate who was then practicing in Madurai, briefly led the agitation when the pioneers were behind bars.

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He wrote to 'Periyar' E.V. Ramasamy who was then the Tamil Nadu Pradesh Congress Committee president, requesting him to be at the helm of the campaign.

Mahatma Gandhi and C. Rajagopalachari (Rajaji) provided guidance. Periyar reached Vaikom on April 13, 1924 after temporarily handing over party responsibilities to Rajaji.

From the day of his arrival, Periyar was at the forefront of the struggle till its conclusion. Mobilising volunteers and garnering public support, he visited villages in and around Vaikom, Tiruvanthapuram and Nagercoil and delivered witty yet fiery speeches. Owing to enthusiastic response, he was banished from Kottayam and Kollam.

He was eventually arrested in May 1924 and served one month of simple imprisonment. When Periyar returned to Vaikom after release, he was arrested again in July 1924 and was sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for four months.

He was the only Satyagrahi to be sentenced to rigorous imprisonment, pointed out Pazha Athiyaman, a Tamil writer and biographer, in his book Vaikom Porattam.

While fellow Satyagrahis were treated as political prisoners, Periyar was denied that status. He was arrested again in Erode as a ploy to keep him away from Vaikom.

He was soon called as 'Vaikom Veerar' (hero of Vaikom), a term first used by Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundaram, a Tamil journalist, wrote Athiyaman.

Apart from being the only leader from outside Kerala to be invited to the movement's victory celebrations (in November 1925), Periyar was even asked to preside over it, Athiyaman added.

Gradually, the temple authorities changed tactics by barricading the roads. In passive resistance, the Satyagrahis positioned themselves outside the barricades and went on hunger strikes that lasted for days.

As the agitation progressed, irate caste Hindus resorted to violence through assaults and pouring of irritants into the eyes of the Satyagrahis.

Role of women

The participation of women, especially those from the families of Satyagrahi leaders including Periyar's wife Nagammai and sister Kannammal, empowered womenfolk to play an unprecedented role in the fight.

The Congressmen at Vaikom reached out to their brethren in Madras Presidency, who contributed money and men.

The non-violent movement gained widespread attention, with the Akalis (Sikhs) from Punjab extending support by opening a community kitchen (langar) for the volunteers.

However, it was soon closed down following a directive from Mahatma Gandhi who wanted the agitation to be a "Hindu affair".

A fight amidst flood

In July 1924, Vaikom witnessed a deluge. According to a report in The Hindu, the Satyagrahis, unmindful of the inclement weather, continued their agitation. With the water level at the eastern barricade having risen three to four feet, the volunteers waded their way in waist-deep water while the police stood guard in boats.

When Mulam Thirunal, the king of Travancore died in August 1924, the Satyagraha was temporarily suspended and resumed in a few days.

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In a show of solidarity for the social reform, a large group of caste Hindus, in November 1924, marched from Travancore till the royal palace at Tiruvananthapuram, as advised by Gandhi.

They handed over a memorandum with 25,000 signatures of caste Hindus to Queen Sethulakshmi Bai (Maharani Regent) of Travancore, demanding to open the approach roads to Vaikom temple for all castes.

She passed it over to Sree Moolam Popular Assembly where the motion proposed in favour of unrestricted use of public roads around the Vaikom temple was defeated by the narrowest margin of just one vote (21 votes against 22) in February 1925.

Arrival of Gandhi

Gandhi, who arrived at Vaikom in March 1925, held a series of discussions with leaders of various caste groups and met Maharani Regent at her Varkala camp.

Although the Queen expressed her willingness to opening all the roads, but, as the head of State, she said she had to heed to public opinion, mentioned Pazha. Athiyaman

On November 23, 1925, three roads (leading to the Western, Southern and Northern entrances) excluding the one leading to the Eastern entrance of Vaikom temple were thrown open to all castes, after the prohibitory orders were withdrawn.

The fourth road reserved only for Brahmins remained out of bounds for Muslims and Christians too.

A week later, the Vaikom Satyagraha was officially withdrawn on November 30, 1925 after consultations between Gandhi and W.H. Pitt, the then police commissioner of Travancore. A compromise was reached following the release of all prisoners and grant of access to three of the four roads.

Temple Entry Proclamation

In November 1936, almost a decade after the conclusion of the Satyagraha, the historic Temple Entry Proclamation was signed by the Maharaja of Travancore which removed the age-old ban on the entry of marginalised castes into the temples of Travancore.

The Vaikom Satyagraha brought open the rift between Gandhi and Periyar. While Gandhi saw it as Hindu reformist movement, Periyar called it a fight against caste-based atrocities.

Periyar was not happy with the partial success attained, and he eventually quit Congress months later. George Joseph too quit Congress owing to disagreement with Gandhi.

Recent developments

1Memorials

The Kerala government, in July 2014, announced the establishment of Vaikom Satyagraha Memorial Museum and Mahatma Gandhi statue at Vaikom. Nearly six years later, the museum was inaugurated in January 2020.

Unlike conventional museums, the Vaikom Satyagraha Memorial Museum does not house historical artefacts or exhibits. It contains documentation and archival materials on the non-violent movement.

For instance, a replica of one of the sign boards that cautioned the oppressed communities against the use of the temple road has been placed inside the museum as a reminder of the deplorable and discriminatory socio-political climate of the time.

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Earlier, a memorial of Periyar was constructed in Vaikom 29 years ago. The memorial located near Valiyakavala Junction that comprise a life-size statue of the social reformer along with a library was established in January 1994. It was handed over to Tamil Nadu government years later.

The memorial, now lies neglected and the Tamil Nadu government is to renovate it at an estimated cost of ₹8.14 lakh. It is also taking steps to establish a new memorial at Arookutty village in Kerala where Periyar was first lodged following his arrest during his participation in the social reform struggle.

2Vaikom Awards

Starting this year on September 17, on Periyar's birth anniversary, the Tamil Nadu government would be presenting the Vaikom Award in memory of Periyar, to remarkable change-makers who fight for the welfare of the oppressed in States outside Tamil Nadu.

As the year 2024 marks the centenary of the Vaikom Satyagraha, Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin are to jointly inaugurate the centenary celebrations, during a function to be held at Vaikom on April 1, 2023.

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