

# A *Savarna Jatha* for the Cause of the *Avarnas*

G. Suraj

Assistant Professor, Department of History

Government College for Women, Thiruvananthapuram

## Abstract

The Savarnajatha, or Savarna march, was organised by Mannathu Padmanabhan to promote the cause of Avarnas by facing the contemporary injustice of untouchability and ensuring their equality with others. It was nearly unheard of at the time for upper-caste Hindus to promote the cause of non-caste minorities. The setting for such a large demonstration was the Vaikom Satyagraha. When the Vaikom satyagraha stretched on for too long, Mahatma Gandhi suggested that a *Savarnajatha* from Vaikom travel to Travancore's capital, Trivandrum, and present a petition to Rani Lekshmi Bai, Travancore's Regent Queen. The Jatha was warmly received by the locals and led to Sri Narayana Guru's divine presence in Varkala, which was an unforgettable event. Mannathu Padmanabhan presided over a large meeting held there. He gave an amazing speech there. Even though the mission was only partially successful, it was significant on a national level. Gandhiji, E.V Ramaswami Naiker, Sree Narayana Guru, and Swami Sradhananda were among those who lived there.

**Keywords:** *Satyagraha, Savarnajatha, Avarnas, Protests, Jatha, Temple Entry*

## Introduction

In a time of caste, communal, and religious fervour and fury, the Nair Service Society, led by Mannathu Padmanabhan, organised the *Savarnajatha*, or *Savarna* march, for the cause of *Avarnas* by confronting the current injustice of untouchability and securing their equality with others. The fact that upper-caste Hindus championed the cause of non-caste minorities was almost unheard of at the time. The Vaikom satyagraha provided the backdrop for such a big demonstration. When the Vaikom satyagraha dragged on for an extended period, Mahatma Gandhi advised that a *Savarnajatha* from Vaikom travel to Trivandrum, Travancore's capital, and present a petition to Rani Lekshmi Bai, Travancore's Regent Queen (Balakrishnan & Leeladevi 1982, p. 63). Mannam assumed command of the *Savarnajatha* as captain. A.K. Pillai and T.K. Madhavan assisted him. On November 1st, 1924,

the *Jatha* left Vaikom after performing prayers at the Mahadeva Temple to fulfil its mission. In advance of the parade, a board with "freedom of movement is the birthright of all citizens" and an Indian National Congress banner was carried. Two lines of Khadi-clad, Gandhi capped volunteers walked behind Supreme Commander Mannathu Padmanabhan. The sight of these people walking forward, singing specially produced songs for the occasion, moved everyone who witnessed it. The *Jatha* set out on November 1st 1924, at 6 pm by chanting hymns like

*Maranathekkalum bhayamakum theendal palaka Nilkkunnathu kandal*

*Avayellam neekkeettavamanam bhumikkozhi Vakkeedenam sivasambho!*

*Bhagavante dasappadivittangottu vida Kollanulla madikondu*

*Thirumumbil vannu bhajanam cheyyunnu thiru Vakkathappa sivasambho*

(Madhavan Pillai 1993, pp. 36–37).

(Oh Lord Shiva, who is enshrined at Vaikom Temple!, The signboards on the temple premises proclaiming untouchability appear to us more dreadful than death. You may kindly bless for their removal and thus avoid disgrace to us. As we are always your humble servants and are reluctant to move away from your abode; we hereby come right in front of you and do hereby propitiate you with prayers!)

### **The March or *Jatha***

*Nirapara* and *Nilavilakku* were used to welcome *Jatha*. More volunteers joined the *Jatha* at each location, and the townspeople greeted the captain with flowers. Soon after, a new spirit and awakening occurred, which had a social and political impact. The Nair Service Society, led by Mannathu Padmanabhan, gave the Indian National Congress a new lease on life. The '*Savarna Jatha*' was, in specific ways, a potent propaganda tool for the Indian National Congress in Travancore, and it was successful in getting the Congress' messages to Travancore villages. For the first time, the peasants of Travancore were able to glimpse the Congress' tricolour banner. Leaders from every social stratum, every neighbourhood, and religious denomination volunteered to join the march (Ushakumari 2009, p. 61). The *Jatha*'s most significant aspect was that it drew people from all *Savarnas*, from Nairs to Nambudiris, including prominent figures like Samudayathil Kurup, Prakkulam Parameswara Pillai, Kottur Pappu Pillai, and others (Padmanabhan 1954, p. 109). At several points, the *Jatha* was greeted with welcome songs, garlands, and other decorations.

## Through the Events

The *Jatha* was welcomed by the locals and led to the holy presence of Sri Narayana Guru in Varkala, which was a remarkable experience. There was a big conference there, and Mannathu Padmanabhan presided over it. There, he delivered a stunning speech. Sree Narayana Guru praised Mannathu Padmanabhan's *Jatha* for his selfless service to the cause of the *Avarnas*, saying it was the most excellent method for *Savarnas* to express their sympathy with the *Avarnas*. After getting Guru's blessings, the *Jatha* left Varkala on November 11th, 1924, and arrived at Trivandrum on November 11th, 1924, after a 10-day journey on foot. The *Jatha* then proceeded to Shangumugham Beach, where a massive public gathering was held. Several motions were voted at the gathering to support the eradication of untouchability and the right to travel. Changanassery Parameswaran Pillai was also permitted to draught and present a paper to the Regent in person, arguing for the need for a statute to end the practice of untouchability. As a result of this decision, Changanassery Parameswaran Pillai wrote and presented a memorial to Her Highness, requesting that all roads and public institutions be made available to all classes of people without regard to caste or creed (Vaikom Satyagraha Files n.d.). However, the Regent informed them that she was awaiting the outcome of the freedom of travel bill, which was then before the legislature, and that it would be inappropriate to decide on the topic right away (Padmanabhan & Menon 2003, p. 110). The Regent's declaration of this decision sparked discontent among the leaders, and the public became enraged, accusing the Regent of being swayed by Rani's conservative advisors. The deputation also met with Diwan, but it was all for naught. This resolution was also defeated in the Legislative Council. During the resolution discussion, members pointed out that the roads in question were public highways and that the notices were posted outside the temple grounds. "The municipality sweeps and lights the road outside the temple boundary wall (Vaikom Satyagraha Files n.d.)." They were also prepared to stage a satyagraha in front of the palace gate to get their demand met. After seeing the situation had deteriorated, Mannathu Padmanabhan delivered a heartfelt speech that helped to calm the crowd's fervor and fury, and they dispersed quietly. The *Jatha* was given out on November 13th, but the Satyagraha went on.

## Other Participation

Not just because of the personal qualities of its participants but also because of the tremendous support obtained by the *Savarnas*, the *Savarnajatha* could be carried out calmly and without obstruction. Despite the fact that the mission was only partially successful, it was of national significance. It was home to renowned figures such as Gandhiji, E.V Ramaswami Naiker, Sree Narayana Guru, and Swami Sradhananda. It was also backed by the Akalidals of Amritsar, led by Lala Lal Singh and Kripal Singh, who set up a free food place for *Satyagrahis*. Because of the intervention of Mannathu Padmanabhan and the NSS, the anti-untouchability movement in Vaikom became popular, and the *Savarnajatha* played an essential role in the history of Vaikom satyagraha. Even though the *Savarnajatha* movement had no immediate results, it can be considered a movement that opened the way for the achievement of everyone's right to travel on public highways and the peaceful implementation of temple admission.

The *Savarnajatha* instilled a spirit of equality in the people, particularly the lower caste Hindus. The Nair Service Society revolutionised the prevailing social order, which surprised the so-called Manusmriti exponents and Vedic hegemony delegates. For the first time in Kerala, this social change inspired people from all walks of life, providing impetus and power to new social movements to ensure equal access to human rights for all members of society.

## Gandhiji and His Visit

Gandhiji paid a visit to Vaikom on March 9th, 1925, and spoke to the *Satyagrahis* there. The orthodox section's objection to this subject was just too strong. Gandhiji wants *Satyagrahis* and anti-*Satyagrahis* to agree. On March 10th 1925, he met Indamthuruthil Nambiyathiri, the leader of the orthodox wing, at his home for a compromise meeting, but neither party was able to reach an agreement. Finally, Gandhiji suggested three solutions to the situation. First, gather feedback from the bulk of people in Travancore or Vaikom. Second, consider forming an arbitration body comprising one representative from each party and Diwan as its head. Third, any authority from Hindu scriptures demonstrating untouchability or unapproachability can be produced, and if so, he is ready to withdraw the Satyagraha as soon as feasible. The *Savarnas*, on the other hand, rejected these recommendations, claiming that it was a question of religious conviction. If the opposing party does not come to a reasonable arrangement, Gandhiji accepts full responsibility for the Vaikom satyagraha campaign and appears to be inclined to support it

with force at his command (Vaikom Satyagraha Files n.d.). "I have come, therefore, to reason with my orthodox friends. I

have come to plead with them, and with their courtesy and kindness, I was able to wait upon them this afternoon," Gandhiji remarked during a public assembly in Perumchilampu, Vaikom. They listened to me patiently and patiently. We disagreed. I tried to persuade them by appealing to their logic. I tried to appeal to their humanity. I also appealed to their Hinduism. I'm sorry to tell you that I couldn't give you the impression that I had hoped to give you. However, the word "despair" does not appear in my dictionary. I'll be depressed when I've lost faith in God and humanity. But, because I believe in God, because I believe that we are here meeting together, and because I see that humanity lives on despite our differences and quarrels, I believe that the truth that I claim to represent will impose itself on my orthodox friends here for the time being."

### **Opinion of the *Savarnas***

Meanwhile, the *Savarnas* claimed that untouchability was mentioned in Hindu scriptures. They submitted four verses from Keralacharam, allegedly penned by Sankaracharya, as evidence and a certificate from the Kodungallur Raja attesting to the book's validity. Gandhiji returned to Thiruvananthapuram with incredible frustration and met with the Regent Rani. "Her Highness sympathises, so far as she is concerned, and is total with those attempting to seek restitution," he remarked in his meeting with the Rani. I am free to inform you that she believes that these roads in Vaikom should be accessible to people of all socioeconomic strata. But, as the Head of State, she feels powerless to offer the relief that is required unless Travancore's public opinion is organised in an entirely legitimate, peaceful, and constitutional manner, though ever so emphatic. I, for one, fully accept the situation. It is up to you and me to break the blind orthodoxy's opposition (Vaikom Satyagraha Files n.d.). "Concerning the conversation we have had as to the possibility and desirability of removing the barriers at Vaikom and the picket, which prevents satyagraha volunteers from crossing the boundary line on the roads leading to the temple, the position I understand is this," Gandhiji wrote to William Pitt on March 18th, 1925. In your perspective, the cause I care about would be further advanced if I persuaded the *Satyagrahis* to respect the borderline without the barricades and pickets, pending a final judgement. You claim that the existence of barricades and pickets strengthens orthodox thought because orthodox individuals incorrectly assume

that the government's goal in erecting barricades and keeping pickets is to assist them in maintaining their position. I understand from our conversation that you may be able to have the existing orders under which you are acting revoked if I agree to respect the boundary line in the manner you suggest, but I am hesitant to believe that the action you propose if taken by the *Satyagrahis*, will soften the hearts of the orthodox and weaken their position. I completely understand the motivation behind your proposals: a referendum in which *Savarna* Hindus vote in specific areas; arbitration, or the interpretation and examination of the authenticity of texts from Hindu Shastras allegedly available to the orthodox in support of their contention regarding the use of roads around certain temples.

Adopting one or all of the proposals must be an easy matter (Letter from Gandhiji to William Pitt, Commissioner of Police 1925)." Both sides agreed to the agreement's provisions, which took effect on April 7th, 1925. "The barricades and huts around the prohibited are being pulled, and the police pickets will all be withdrawn from the 7th proximo," Pitt said of the settlement's outcome. Except for 15 *Sathyagrahi* volunteers sitting or standing on the highways, the situation would be the same before the Satyagraha began on that date (Letter from Gandhiji to William Pitt, Commissioner of Police 1925)."

## Conclusion

An agreeable settlement was reached as a result, which both parties accepted. This was owing to Gandhiji's prompt involvement, and the government quickly lifted the prohibition orders. As a result, the temple's three side roadways were opened. "We are happy that the reason for which satyagraha was undertaken has been attained,"

K. Kelappan said, "and we, therefore, withdraw satyagraha from Vaikom routes on the instruction of our beloved master (Gandhiji)." As a result, after a 20-month battle, Congress retreated from the Vaikom road, but the *Avarnas* remained on the pre- satyagraha site. Because the settlement was "flimsy in one respect," according to Gandhiji because the government had taken shelter under the terms "open to non- Hindus," reserving to themselves the liberty of excluding non-Hindus as well as *Avarna* Hindus from the roads so that the latter would have no excuse to say that the roads that were open to non-Hindus were not open to them." Even though the compromise formula did not work, it marked a watershed moment in the Temple Entry Movement's history. It paved a new path to victory in the race. The majority were fully aware that it was a rehearsal or that it could serve as a safety valve in future temple access

movements.

## References

Balakrishnan, V & Leeladevi, R 1982, *Mannathu Padmanabhan and the revival of Nairs in Kerala*, Advent Books Vikas Publishing House, New York, p. 63.

Letter from Gandhiji to William Pitt, Commissioner of Police 1925, *Correspondence relating to Vaikom Satyagraha*, 18 March, Judicial Department, KSA, p. Vol 7.

Madhavan Pillai, K 1993, *Savarnajatha*, Karmayugam, Trivandrum, pp. 36–37.

Padmanabhan, M 1954, *Ente Jeevitha Smarnakal*, NSS Head Quarters, Changanassery, p. 109.

Padmanabhan, M & Menon, PC 2003, *Reminiscences of My Life*, Cultural Publications Dept., Govt. of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, p. 110.

Ushakumari, KR 2009, *Changanassery Parameswaran Pillai and The Socio Political Evolution of Modern Travancore*, St. Joseph Press, Thiruvananthapuram, p. 61.

Vaikom Satyagraha Files n.d., *File No. 362/24*, Political Department, KSA.

– n.d., *Vol. VI*, KSA, Political Department, KSA.

– n.d., *Vol. VI*, *File No. 3036/4*, Political Department, KSA.