

# Periyar, the hero of Vaikom

On his death anniversary, remembering a leader who gave new life to a sagging movement



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To people in Kerala, Vaikom is associated with the name of the great Malayalam writer, Muhammad Basheer. The historically minded would associate it with an important satyagraha during the freedom struggle. In Tamil Nadu, it conjures up the bearded figure of Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (September 17, 1879-December 24, 1973). Vaikom is a metaphor for social justice – when scores of satyagrahis from the Tamil country joined hands with their brethren in a heroic struggle.

Vaikom was then in the princely state of Travancore. The four streets surrounding the temple of the presiding deity, Lord Mahadeva, were out of bounds for Ezhavas and other castes counted as ritually lower. In 1924, a satyagraha was launched against this injustice by T.K. Madhavan. It lasted for 18 months. In the initial stages, K.P. Kesava Menon and George Joseph led the struggle. Other prominent figures included Kurur Neelakanthan Namboodiri and Mannathu Padmanabhan. Towards the end, M.K. Gandhi reached Vaikom and gave it the finishing flourish.

**Leadership at a critical juncture**  
The satyagraha began on March 30 with the active support of the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee. But within a week all its leaders were behind bars. While George Joseph sought directions from Gandhi and C. Rajagopalachari, he wrote to Periyar pleading with him to lead the satyagraha. Periyar was in the midst of political work when Joseph's missive reached him. As he was then the president of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee, Periyar handed over temporary charge to Rajaji before reaching Vaikom on April 13, 1924. From that date to the day of the victory celebrations, November 29, 1925, he was in the thick of the struggle giving it leadership at a critical juncture.

Periyar presided over the satyagraha in the face of untold violence and indignity inflicted by the orthodox and the repression of the police.



"Periyar was in the forefront of every aspect of the Vaikom struggle." A view of the Vaikom Mahadeva Temple. ■ VIPIN CHANDRAN

To mobilise support, he visited villages in and around Vaikom and delivered public speeches in several towns. His campaign tour stretched to Thiruvananthapuram and even further to Nagercoil.

When the Kerala leaders asked for Gandhi's permission to make the satyagraha an all-India affair, Gandhi refused saying that volunteers from Tamil Nadu would keep it alive. The Mahatma was not wrong. As the British Resident said in his report to the government of Madras: "In fact, the movement would have collapsed long ago but for the support it has received from outside Travancore..." Historian T.K. Ravindran observes that Periyar's arrival gave "a new life to the movement".

What was Periyar's role in the satyagraha? He made a cogent and compelling case for it. He used his wit and folk logic to punch holes in the argument of the orthodox. The speeches reported by the secret police and the press make for interesting reading nearly a century later. As his campaign met with an enthusiastic response, the government imposed prohibitory orders on him. He was excommunicated from Kottayam district and then Kollam. Unmindful, he continued his campaign. An angry administration arrested him on May 21. Periyar refused to cooperate with the court saying that the trial was no more than an eyewash and braved the magistrate to inflict any punishment. On May 22, he was awarded a month's simple imprisonment which he spent at Arookutty jail.

On his release, Periyar went to Vaikom rather than to his home town of

Erode much to the chagrin of the district magistrate who chided the police superintendent for this. As Periyar showed no sign of slackening, he was arrested 27 days later, on July 18. This time he was sentenced to four months of rigorous imprisonment and lodged in Thiruvananthapuram central jail. While fellow satyagrahis were treated as political prisoners, Periyar was denied this status. Rajaji wrote in a letter to *The Hindu* that Periyar was condemned to "rigorous imprisonment and irons and jail clothing and to deprive him of all society to which other satyagraha prisoners were rightly deemed entitled is totally unjustifiable". Infuriated by this discriminatory treatment, fellow prisoner Kesava Menon wrote to the government expressing objection but to no avail. The indignities continued until all the satyagrahis were released when the minor king Chithira Tirunal ascended the throne.

Periyar continued his campaign in Vaikom apart from Nedunganda and Nagercoil. On September 10, he returned to Erode where he was again arrested – but this time by the British Indian police for a seditious speech delivered earlier. It was but a ploy to keep him away from Vaikom.

## At the forefront

Periyar was in the forefront of every aspect of the struggle. As president of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee he arranged for a contribution of ₹1,000. He was part of every consultative meeting, peace committee, campaign party, etc., including the eight-member deputation constituted to meet the Diwan. Every major

personality who came to Vaikom met with Periyar. This included Swami Shraddhananda of the Arya Samaj. Rajaji met Periyar in prison before proceeding to Vaikom. Gandhi too consulted him during his visit. Periyar had received Gandhi at Erode (March 8, 1925) on his way to Vaikom, joining him later at Varkala on March 12. The police superintendent records that Periyar was present in the small closed door meeting of Gandhi with Sree Narayana Guru. Periyar recalled on many occasions that Gandhi had consulted him before his all-important meeting with Maharani Regent. It should be added that his wife Nagammal and his sister S.R. Kannammal were with him for much of the agitation, apart from offering satyagraha themselves.

When, following an agreement between Gandhi and the police, the prohibition order against Periyar which had been in place for over a year was withdrawn, Gandhi wrote in *Young India* (April 23, 1925): "The reader will be glad to learn that the Travancore Government have... withdrawn the prohibition order against Sjt. Ramaswamy Naicker..."

The satyagraha ended in partial victory in November 1925: three out of four streets were thrown open. Nevertheless, it was an important step. Final victory came 11 years later with the Travancore Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936. By that time not only had Periyar become a bitter critic of Gandhi, but even his views on satyagraha changed.

Periyar had arrived at Vaikom, on invitation, and had given a new life to a sagging movement. He was jailed twice, and was the only person to be sentenced to rigorous imprisonment. From available evidence we know that he visited Vaikom seven times. Of the 114 days that he devoted to the struggle he languished in prison for 74 days. Apart from being the only leader from outside the State to be invited to the victory celebrations, he was even asked to preside over it.

No wonder, Thiru.Vi. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, the great journalist and labour leader, called him the Vaikom Veerar, the hero of Vaikom, even at the time of the struggle.

*This essay draws from the author's full-length Tamil book Vaikom Porattam (Kalachuvadu Pathippagam). Translated by A.R. Venkatachalamapathy*