

BOOKREVIEWS

**Mary Elizabeth King: Gandhian
Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability
in South India: The 1924-25 Vykom
Satyagraha and the Mechanisms of
Change**

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The Vykom Satyagraha was one of the important campaigns with which Gandhi was associated in the 1920s - and was promoted by the Indian National Congress party. It took place within the broader context of the Indian independence struggle, but was focused on a key issue of justice in Indian society - the discrimination against dalits (outcasts or untouchables in English translation) within the Hindu caste system. The campaign, which lasted from 30 March 1924 to 23 November 1925, was waged specifically to end the ban on untouchables using the roads that passed near the Vykom temple in the South Indian princely state of Travancore (now part of Kerala). But it was linked to much broader issues relating to the rights of untouchables and the role of the caste system in the independent India the Congress party was seeking to achieve.

The Vykom campaign is also of considerable interest because it reflected Gandhi's approach to nonviolent resistance. Vykom has often been interpreted as an important example of the efficacy of voluntary suffering by resisters in changing the hearts of the upper caste Hindus controlling the temple, and thus validating Gandhi's belief in the possibility of converting an opponent. Gandhi did not initiate the campaign, but he did play an important role in advising authoritatively on the conduct of the struggle and in its final resolution.

Mary King highlights the question whether Vykom really illustrates the possibility of conversion as one of the ways in which nonviolent resistance can succeed. She notes that it is the first of the four mechanisms of change analysed by Gene Sharp - the others being accommoda-

tion with an opponent, overthrow of a repressive power, or its disintegration as a result of the struggle. Her purpose is to demonstrate the inadequacy and inaccuracy of earlier 'idealised' accounts of Vykom in classics of the literature on Gandhian satyagraha, in particular Richard Gregg's 1934 *The Power of Nonviolence*, Krishnalal Shridharani's 1939 *War Without Violence* and Joan Bondurant's 1965 *Conquest of Violence*. This misleading version of Vykom was also perpetuated by Gene Sharp in his 1973 *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. King notes, however, that a number of academic historians have examined the complexities of and flaws in the actual campaign, as did Mahadev Desai, Gandhi's secretary and editor, in his 1937 account *The Epic of Travancore*. (She draws on all these in her own narrative and analysis.)

In the early stages of the Vykom struggle both sides adopted a confrontational strategy. The Travancore state authorities ordered the police to barricade off and guard the roads passing the temple, and as well known leaders of the protest arrived they were officially prohibited from taking part. The authorities therefore turned a planned symbolic protest into an act of civil disobedience. The protesters responded by sending small contingents from the larger protest march to walk through the barricades each day. Volunteers flocked to join and more leaders arrived - often to be promptly arrested. But on 10 April the police stopped the arrests but reinforced the barricades. The protesters decided not to scale the barricades, but to maintain a vigil in front of them on all four sides of the temple. Their initial response of also fasting at the barricades was discouraged by Gandhi, who viewed it in this context as a form of coercive violence.

King concludes that the Vykom volunteers, despite their pertinacity over many months in maintaining a presence in front of the barriers to the roads - including through a period of major flooding when they often stood waist or even shoulder deep in water - did not change the hearts and minds of the Brahmins in charge of the temple and its surrounds. Moreover, Gandhi's meeting with high caste officials from the temple in March 1925 achieved no hint of concession. Instead, a negotiated settlement on access to the roads was reached in stages with the political authorities who had ultimate legal jurisdiction. Initially Gandhi agreed, in March 1925, with the British police commissioner on a de-

escalation of the struggle by both sides. This involved the removal of barricades to the roads, on the understanding the protesters would not try to use them, a position formally endorsed by the Maharani of Travancore in early April 1925. The satyagraha continued on a symbolic and reduced scale until November 1925, after the Travancore government had released eight of the leaders of the Vykam protest from prison and constructed a separate exclusive access to the temple for the Brahmins, which allowed everyone, including untouchables, to use the other roads. Thus the satyagraha ended with a compromise. But it had encouraged other struggles in the state and government reforms: in 1928 the government ordered that untouchables throughout Travancore should have the right to use roads by temples, and in 1936 the new Maharajah authorised their entry into temples.

This detailed account, based on extensive interviews with Indian historians and study of relevant records, raises a number of other important issues relating to the Vykam struggle. The first is how it fitted into the much longer and broader struggle by the untouchables in Travancore for their basic social and religious rights. King charts the extreme complexity of the caste system in India in general and Travancore in particular, where - as elsewhere in Kerala - discrimination against untouchables was particularly extreme, involving not only a taboo on caste Hindus coming into direct contact with untouchables, but requiring untouchables to maintain fixed distances from caste, and especially upper caste, Hindus to avoid pollution. Untouchability was linked to 'unapproachability' and even 'unseeability' - for a caste Hindu to see an untouchable in the morning was ill-omened. Although all untouchables, who constituted about 40 per cent of the total population of Travancore according to an 1875 census, suffered from this kind of discrimination, there were considerable variations within their ranks. The majority came from the Ezhava community (possibly originally Buddhist immigrants from Ceylon), some of whose members by the 1920s had acquired education and some wealth. Below them in the social and religious hierarchy were a number of distinct and poorer groups, some previously slaves, undertaking the most menial tasks.

The Ezhavas had begun to organise and petition for their rights by the 1890s, and by the 1920s were represented by their own associa-

tion, the SNDP Yogam, led by Sri Narayan Guru, which promoted its own interpretations of Hinduism and also campaigned for the right to education in government schools, and to enter government service. This body was also demanding not only the right to use roads by temples (by 1919 recommending tax refusal as a tactic to achieve this goal) but to enter Brahmin temples. But although a key local leader of the Vykam struggle, T.K. Madhavan, was an Ezhava and the SNDP Yogam gave support (despite reservations expressed by Narayan Guru about the tactics adopted), King notes that Ezhava involvement in Vykam was very limited. Much of the active support came from middle and higher caste Hindus, and drew on volunteers from the neighbouring Tamil Naidu (also a source of women volunteers) and from across India.

The role of high caste Hindus in opposing discrimination and supporting the Vykam struggle was, however, important. A striking demonstration of support was the 124 mile grand procession of hundreds of Brahmins from Vykam to the state capital of Travancore in November 1924. Their purpose was to deliver a petition signed by thousands of high caste Hindus to the Maharani, asking for temple roads to be opened to untouchables. A second procession of 500, taking a different route, also converged on the capital.

Vykam aroused interest from other religious groups, such as Christians and Muslims. Syrian Christians suffering from job discrimination had earlier taken up the cause of the untouchables as part of a campaign for civil rights in the state. Some wished to expand Vykam into a broader civil rights campaign - George Joseph, a local Congress leader of the struggle and a Christian, arrested in April 1924 - saw Vykam as an assertion of 'the civic rights of all inhabitants to use public roads' (p. 119, quoting from a biography of Joseph). Gandhi, however, tried to limit participation to Hindus, believing their suffering would have more impact on high caste Hindus. His stance can be seen as not only exclusive but conservative, since his emphasis was on changing the hearts and minds of members of the upper caste. This approach seemed to undermine the importance of the untouchables themselves mobilising and organising for change. It also seemed to imply acceptance of caste hierarchy. Indeed, although Gandhi did passionately oppose the discrimination suffered by untouchables, he was reluctant to reject the caste

system altogether, which set him in opposition to the national leader of the dalits, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. Although Ambedkar did publicly recognise the important impact of the Vykom struggle in India in a 1924 speech, he attacked the Congress Party and Gandhi for not adopting a strong enough position on untouchability.

Gandhi has often been criticised for his willingness to compromise with opponents rather than pressing for greater concessions, and was criticised for compromising over Vykom. One reason for his approach here, King suggests, was his reluctance to promote a militant campaign of disobedience against a Hindu ruler. The role of the nominally independent princely states (incorporated into the British empire through a system of British residents, who promoted administrative change but tended not to intervene too much in internal religious and social practices) was a sensitive issue for the Congress Party. But it can also be argued that a more fundamental reason for his general tendency to compromise lay in his basic approach to satyagraha, and his desire to show respect for his opponents as individuals and to try to promote trust.

King provides a wealth of fascinating detail, and raises many issues relating to the tactics and leadership of the Vykom struggle. She also discusses the impact of Vykom and later Indian campaigns of nonviolent resistance on the developing US Civil Rights Movement (in which she herself played a direct role in the early 1960s). But her central concern is to use Vykom as a test of Gandhi's whole approach to nonviolent resistance, and to adduce possible lessons for today. She provides a sympathetic analysis of Gandhi's interpretation (see pp. 62-73 for an excellent summary); and gives weight to the importance of the constructive programme as a basis for a new just society. One important element of this programme, spinning cotton to substitute for the boycotted British cotton goods, was part of the routine at the ashram established at Vykom. But King also emphasises criticism of Gandhi's strategy over Vykom, and suggests that elements of Gandhi's approach - such as the belief in conversion and conviction that nonviolent action, if undertaken correctly, can always work - could be dangerous for contemporary civil resistance movements.

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