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Political Dimensions: How Temple Entry Shaped Kerala's Democratic Values

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The Temple Entry Movement in Kerala was a major social reform struggle aimed at ending caste-based discrimination that prevented lower-caste communities from entering Hindu temples. Beginning in the early 20th century, the movement gained momentum through the efforts of reformers like Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, T.K. Madhavan, and K. Kelappan, who worked tirelessly to challenge oppressive social customs. The turning point of the temple entry movement was the Vaikom and the Guruvayur Sathyagrahas that attracted national attention and support from leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi. The movement culminated in the historic Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936, issued by Maharaja Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma, which granted all castes the right to worship in Hindu temples under the Travancore state. This proclamation marked a significant victory for social equality and became a symbol of Kerala's progressive path towards justice and human dignity. The Harijan organisations that emerged all over India and campaigns for it led to an awakening and enthusiasm among the people throughout India and its ripples were felt in Travancore.

The untouchability in its extreme form of unapproachability has existed for several centuries in India is apparent from Fa Hien's description of the Chandalas who were obliged to live apart and were required when entering a town or bazaar to strike a piece, of wood as a warning of their approach. Fa Hien never went to South India, but it is evident that the unapproachability he describes was an echo of that existing in South India[1].

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The dawn of modernity in India did not begin with the arrival of the West, but rather through socio-religious reform movements. In 19th century, Travancore, Cochin and Malabar regions of Kerala were socially backward. In North India the renaissance movements were started mainly to protect the interests of the upper castes, in Kerala it started from the lower castes. The leaders put forward the ideas that were useful for creating a modern society. Their attempt was to eliminate the age long caste system from Kerala[2].The beginning of the 19th century witnessed the influence of the new culture of the European on the course of the history of Kerala. The humanism, individualism and rationalism of the Europeans excreted tremendous influence on Kerala society. The most powerful source of this cultured influence was the work of the European missionaries introduced rational, popular and secular education. The low caste people got an opportunity to receive English education. Inspired and encouraged by foreign missionaries they began to challenge the social restrictions of feudal society of the medieval period. The Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936 by the King of Travancore Sree Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma, which opened state owned temples to non- caste Hindus, was a result of this[3].

The temple entry Satyagraha attains significance against the dual task taken up by the Indian National Congress – to construct a modern nation-state and to mould a national religion. But it had its disastrous consequences – in driving religious minorities away from the organizational fold and ideological appeal of the Congress. The bitter experiences of Mappila Rebellion of 1921 followed by the conscious involvement of the Congress in the affairs of religious nationalism forced the Mappilas (Muslims) in keep away from nationalist politics and slowly drift towards a marked sectarian identity. Moreover, in the 1930s, the strong communal and caste consciousness let loose by the agitation against caste disabilities could lead the poor towards class consciousness. But the political excitement awakened among the poor and low caste could not be made to go away; it lay ready to be developed into class consciousness. The movement for temple entry registered its crowning victory with the Temple Entry Proclamation in 1936 by which all temples in Travancore were thrown open to all Hindus[4]

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The upliftment of the oppressed classes and the removal of untouchability was one of the most important aspects of Mahatma Gandhi's plan to achieve true Swaraj. The Indian National Congress adopted the scheme of Temple Entry. At the meeting of the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee, the leaders of the party resolved to launch the temple entry Sathyagraha to eradicate the barriers of temple entry of dalits[5]. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the social protest movement in Travancore and other regions of Kerala was gaining momentum. The movement opposed rigid caste practices, such as untouchability, advocated for freedom of movement, access to public amenities including water sources and tanks, entry into temples, educational and employment opportunities, including government jobs, communal dining, and inter-caste marriages, gained momentum. As organizations emerged among all avarna caste groups, encompassing both dalits and savarnas like Nairs and Namboodiris. These organizations began to establish common platforms to articulate similar objectives, including freedom of mobility, temple entry, access to education and employment, and the abolition of untouchability. These became the common focus of the activity of all avarna groups, as all of them were subject to victimisation and oppression on the basis of untouchability, although in varying degrees. The growth of these platforms provided the rationale for T K Madhavan, an SNDP activist who had joined the Indian National Congress, to move a resolution for the eradication of untouchability in the Kakinada AICC session in 1923, which was passed in the session. The Congress also appointed a committee to explore the implementation of the resolution in Kerala and took the leadership in organising the Satyagraha at Vaikom[6].

T.K.Madhavan and C.Raman Thampi were the derivatives of temple entry in Kerala.The temple entry resolution was passed in 1916 at Kolkata in the 132 conference of the Bharata Sabha and in 1918 at Bombay All India Removal of Untouchability resolution accepted. The temple entry was not the objective of Aruvippuram consecration of Sreenarayana Guru but it is included in its impact.The temples consecrated by Sreenarayana Guru considered as Ezhava temples and the influx of devotees to them increased and the fear of loss of the richness and splendor of Savarna temples persuaded Raman Thampi for a resolution of temple entry[7] .

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The Vaikom Struggle was fought against the prohibition of backward caste Hindus from walking on the streets adjacent to the Vaikom Mahadeva temple. When leaders of Kerala State Congress Committee and other social activist leaders began agitating against the injustice, they faced a clamp down by the administration. With the entry of Periyar in 1924, it slowly became a mass movement, bringing people from all classes within its fold. In November 1925, when the restrictions to walk on the streets finally lifted, the long arc of political movement began tilting towards social justice. In the decade that followed, movements erupted in other parts of the country, with B.R. Ambedkar leading protests to enter the Ambadevi Temple and Kalaram Mandir, where Dalits were denied entry[8].

Under the leadership of K P Kesava Menon, a Malabar Nair who was president and editor of the newspaper Mathrubhumi, a Satyagraha was begin on 30 March 1924. On that day, Kesava Menon announced he would violate the law by approaching the temple in the company of avarna Hindus. Four days before the Satyagraha was to start, the District magistrate instructed the police to set up pickets to bar avarnas from using temple roads;his stated aim was to prevent clashes between the sathyagrahis and orthodox Hindus[9].

The struggle that began in the Guruvayur temple was a turning point for Kerala's freedom struggle and social reform. This was one of the most important in the history of the temple entry struggle. The struggle was started against the ban on Dalits entering the temple[10.] Guruvayur Sathyagraha marked the beginning of a new epoch in the realm of the temple entry movement in Kerala. The Sathyagraha which attracted the attention of national leaders and social workers from all over India ,and in which Gandhiji and Rabindra Nath Tagore ,among others intervened ,had a great impact on the social and political circles of Kerala.The Sathyagraha was for the permission to enter the temple and offer worship[11].

In 1931, the Regency rule ended in Travancore and Sri Chithira Thirunal Balarma Varma became the king. Sir CP Rmaswamy Ayyer was appointed as the political advisor and the demand for temple Entry became active[12].Sir CP understood that the non-caste groups were the majority and that wealth could not be produced without utilising their labour, and this promoted them to change their policy. The success of

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Nivarthana Agitation ,establishment of Travancore Public Service Commission in 1935 and the introduction of 35% reservation in jobs ,which created an environment favourable to the temple entry movement., and the temple Entry Proclamation was issued following this[13]. This Proclamation was a memorable historical document. Its ultimate result was the civil right of freedom of worship was recognized[14]. The Travancore Temple Entry Proclamation was the result of the efforts of Mahathma Gandhi. Temple Entry was granted in Travancore after Mahathma Gandhi's efforts had failed. There are over 2000 temples in the state to which the Proclamation applies. After 1936 when the proclamation was issued, over two millions from all over India have visited these temples including members of the backward communities[15].

Conclusion

The Temple Entry Movement stands as a defining moment in India's civil rights history, especially in Kerala. More than a struggle for the entry to sacred and public spaces, it was a demand for dignity, equality, and recognition of fundamental human rights. By challenging deeply entrenched caste barriers, the movement transformed social consciousness and paved the way for legal reforms such as the Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936. It also demonstrated how collective action, moral conviction, and political will can dismantle discriminatory practices. Ultimately, the Temple Entry Movement affirmed that civil rights are not merely legal entitlements but essential conditions for an inclusive and just society. The Travancore Temple Entry Proclamation stimulated further temple entry proclamations in the Princely states of Cochin and British Malabar.

Endnotes:

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