

“Nonviolent Struggle Twice as Effective as Armed Action”

By Navamy Sudhish

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Mary Elizabeth King first encountered racism on the sidewalks of Virginia. As a 7-year-old she noted black men stepping down to let her pass and was stricken by the injustice involved. “It was my grandfather who awakened my sensitivity to racial exclusions. Discrimination was a norm and atrocities against blacks hardly made any news. When I was 22, I went to work with the Civil Rights Movement where I was one of the few whites involved. We believed we were improving things for everyone, not just for blacks,” says the renowned peace activist and political scientist who was in the city for the release of her latest book “Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India: The 1924-25 Vykom Satyagraha and the Mechanisms of Change”.



She says discrimination has a perceptible pattern and what she found in Kerala was just another form of it. “I have been involved in social justice concerns all my life, and during the mid-twentieth century years a lot of African Americans traveled to India to find out what was happening in the subcontinent. They visited sites of the various satyagrahas and interacted with volunteers. By the time I was involved, we heard all the time about India and Gandhi,” she says.

It was Dr. Gene Sharp, perhaps the world’s foremost scholar of nonviolent resistance, who approached Mary to investigate what exactly happened in Vaikom, in Kerala.

“He felt that we had been fed with incorrect information on the Vaikom Satyagraha. It was then, in 2000, that I started my research scouring through archives and newspaper morgues. I found Dr. Sharp was right. Exaggerated, glorified accounts about the Vaikom struggle had traveled to the West. Reputable Gandhi scholars had published reports about an allegedly extraordinary struggle in Vaikom, where Brahmins had embraced the untouchables.



"There is no substantiation for this misrepresentation, and in fact the Dalits were back to where they started at the end of the 604-day-long struggle in 1925. A kind of contrived solution was worked out between Gandhi and the British police commissioner. If we want to be charitable we can call it conflict management. But we could also say it was a gimmick," says King, who later traveled to Kerala to dig deeper. "The more I read the more perplexed I got about these grandiose reports," she says.

During her research, Dr. King came across startling accounts of discrimination as there were strict rules that segregated those without caste from the upper castes. "During the Vaikom Satyagraha in the 1920s the whole subcontinent became aware of extreme practices of untouchability in the princely state of Travancore that didn't exist anywhere else in India. It was not just untouchability, but unapproachability and unseeability as well. There were meticulously prescribed distances to be maintained so as not to pollute a Brahmin, depending upon the level of untouchability. If it was 60 meters for Ezhavas it was 90 for Pulayas, and it was followed with extreme precision," she adds.

King considers patriarchy the most sizeable form of oppression known to the human race in terms of the number of people affected. "In many parts of the world there are severe systems where women are kept under tremendous pressure." A professor of Peace and Conflict Studies, she believes the concept of nonviolence is still relevant. "We have millions of people living under various forms of oppression. But the use of violence will generally create a deep-seated urge for vengeance, generation after generation trying to get back at those responsible for the affliction. In nonviolent resistance you have a better chance of bringing about reconciliation and negotiation." She adds that political scientists now have strong data showing that nonviolent movements are twice as effective compared to guerrilla warfare or armed rebellions. "In the past we suspected that this was the case, but now we have the data to substantiate it," she says.