Changing Hearts and Minds through Non-violent Protest?

David Hardiman

BOOK REVIEWS

Gandhian Non-violent Struggle and Untouchability in South India: The 1924–25 Vykom Satyagraha and the Mechanisms of Change by Mary Elizabeth King; *New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015; pp xxi, 344, Rs 995.*

Besides the well-known all-India campaigns led by M K Gandhi against the British, there were a range of local-level protests that were waged during 1917–47, inspired by Gandhi and his methods. Often, these were against other Indians. Being specific grievances, these, in many cases, gained their immediate objectives, in contrast to the national campaigns, none of which won Swaraj in the short term. There are a number of studies of these discrete movements, some of them excellent, such as Rajendra Vora's (2009) on the Mulshi Satyagraha of 1920–24 against a dam being constructed by the Tatas in the hills near Mumbai. Mary King has now provided another such study of equal distinction, in this case of a satyagraha waged for the rights of Dalits to have access to the public space around the Vykom (Vaikom) temple in Kerala during 1924–25.

Mary King is a veteran non-violence activist. She was first radicalised in her early 20s through her participation, in the 1960s, as a staff member of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee in the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King (no relation) in the United States (US). She wrote a book on her experiences at the time: *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement* (1987). She became a leading thinker and writer in the US on the theory and practice of non-violent resistance. In 1999, she published a major book that examined the non-violent activism of Gandhi and Martin Luther King: *Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr: The Power of Non-violent Action* (*Cultures of Peace*) (1999). While being a remarkable advocate of non-violent methods, one who has toured all over the world speaking on the issue, she is also concerned about elucidating the ways in which such a form of resistance works to the best effect in practice.

In this book, she has provided a detailed study of the Vykom Satyagraha of 1924–25. One of her main concerns is to investigate the claim made by Gandhi that opponents will be won over when their consciences are stirred by the self-imposed suffering of the non-violent protestor. To what extent were the Brahmins of Vykom disarmed in this way?

Ezhavas of Kerala

The protest was launched by some Ezhavas of Travancore state in Kerala. Since the late 19th century, a small educated section of this low-caste group had been campaigning to gain greater social status for their community, a key part of which was being allowed to enter Hindu temples. Initially, they had tried petitioning the Travancore government, which had a reputation for supporting social reform. This tactic had no success due to the reluctance of the princely government to interfere in what it saw as "religious" matters and the intransigence of the higher castes in Kerala.

During the second decade of the 20th century, a more activist organisation emerged amongst the Ezhavas called the Sree Narayana Darma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam led by Sree Narayana Guru (1854–1928). From 1917 onwards, it campaigned actively for temple entry for all. When, around 1920, the Ezhava leaders saw Gandhi using direct action to pressurise the government in British India, they felt that the time had come to switch to more confrontational tactics. They, accordingly, linked their struggle to that of Indian nationalism.

Travancore had its own Congress Committee from the beginning of 1921, led by caste Hindus, which campaigned, among other things, for the abolition of untouchability. Meetings were organised to demand temple entry, and in September 1921, the Ezhava leader T K Madhavan met Gandhi, who advised him to launch a campaign of civil disobedience towards this end. He told them that they must be strictly non-violent and act with self-restraint with the aim of winning over the higher castes through their exemplary behaviour. He cautioned that they must not antagonise their princely rulers in any way, and focus on the justice of this specific demand.

It was only in 1924 that the issue was taken up actively. At a meeting in February, it was decided to concentrate on a demand for the right of access to the roads in the vicinity of the Shiva temple in Vykom. This temple, which was controlled by elite Nambudiri Brahmins, was notorious in the region as a bastion of Brahmin orthodoxy. It was situated in a large complex of about 10 acres surrounded by a wall, with encircling roads that were used for religious processions. Untouchables were not allowed into the compound, and were excluded even from certain sections of the surrounding roads. As a result, they had to take inconveniently circuitous routes when walking through the town.

In focusing on the roads, the campaigners were putting forward a seemingly mild demand that they believed might be conceded quite easily. This was not, however, how the temple Brahmins saw the matter. They were determined to fight off the challenge, believing that any concession would merely give rise to further demands and a consequent unravelling of their prestige and status. They expected the state authorities to support them in this. They had a reputation for using violence to maintain what they saw as the integrity of their sacred

space. The Ezhavas of the town remembered how, when some of them had attempted to enter the temple in the mid-19th century, they had been set upon and murdered by upper-caste people.

Gandhi's Role

Gandhi, just released from jail, was approached and asked to act as leader of the campaign, but he declined the offer. He agreed, however, to give guidance. He advised them to maintain strict non-violence, and accept beatings meekly. He told them that once people witnessed the violence of the oppressor against unarmed protestors, they would gain wider sympathy for their cause.

The protest began on 24 March 1924, with volunteers entering the disputed roads. The police, acting on behalf of the higher castes, arrested them. The first batch was sentenced to six months in jail. The next protest was on 7 April with further arrests and more six-month jail sentences. They were generally treated well in jail. On 10 April, the Travancore police commissioner W H Pitt—a British officer employed by the state government—issued an order to stop the detention of the satyagrahis. Pitt was sympathetic towards the demands of the protestors, but as a Christian he had to be careful to avoid being accused of discriminating against the Brahmins through religious prejudice. He, therefore, adopted a neutral stance. He ordered that barricades be erected on the roads guarded by policemen. As attacking the barriers would have involved violence, the protestors had no choice but to stand in front of them in a silent vigil. The volunteers took no food or water while exposed to the sun. Some fainted after a day of this.

The hunger strike brought attention and enthusiasm to the movement. Support for the Congress soared in the state. Khadi-wearing for the first time became common, and there were demonstrations against the practice of untouchability that were preceded with Congress flags and resonated with cries of "Vande Mataram" and "Mahatma Gandhi ki jai." Resolutions were passed in solidarity with the protestors at Vykom, for the adoption of khadi, and in opposition to liquor-drinking. The attitude of the Travancore authorities was deplored, and demands were made for the roads around the temple to be opened to all. Sympathisers also came in considerable numbers from neighbouring Tamil regions of British India, and joined the protest.

Although Gandhi had stated that he would not take any active role in the movement, he now began interfering. When he heard of the hunger strikes, he sent a telegram advising them to stop it, as when applied in such a way it was in his opinion a form of violence. Rather, they should stand calmly and await arrest. The protestors followed this advice and stopped fasting. Gandhi also insisted that the movement should be carried on only by Hindus. Hitherto, Muslims and Christians had been supporting it. The signatures of orthodox Hindus were to be collected for a petition condemning untouchability to the Maharaja of Travancore. Only through such self-limiting and exemplary behaviour would the hearts of the temple priests be won over.

It soon became clear, however, that rather than respect the protestors for their dignified restraint and self-discipline, the Vykom Brahmins had become more intransigent. Death threats were sent to

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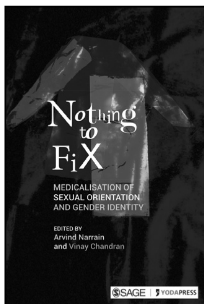

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the satyagrahis. Gandhi's admirers were left bewildered and hesitant and were unsure as to how to proceed. Many lost heart and dropped away. By the end of May 1924, Sree Narayana Guru, the leader of the SNDP Yogam, was beginning to voice his doubts about Gandhi's tactics. He felt that the protestors should attack the barricades and occupy not only the roads, but the temple itself. In other words, they needed to be far more confrontational. Although he was careful not to disagree with Gandhi openly, it was clear that there was a rupture between the two.

The more dedicated satyagrahis remained at their posts, standing without protection from either the sun or rain, and singing religious and nationalist songs. During June 1924, the police made no attempt to stop the temple guards from beating them up. They were hit, kicked, their clothes torn, and limestone was thrown in their eyes. One protestor was beaten so badly that he died, another lost his sight, and others suffered permanent injury. In a message of 1 July 1924, Gandhi stated: "I hope ...that the satyagrahis will remain calm, unperturbed and withal particularly non-violent. It is a time of great trial for them" (Gandhi 1967b: 333).

News of these atrocities polarised opinion in the state. While some orthodox Hindus felt that the protestors deserved such treatment, large numbers of higher-caste people in both Kerala and other parts of India were disgusted by the actions of the temple guards. As Mary King notes, "winning over those who have, hitherto, supported the status quo is a key element in non-violent strategy." In this respect, Gandhi's tactics appeared to be bearing fruit.

End of Struggle

The Travancore authorities refused, however, to intervene in favour of the satyagrahis. By early 1925, the protest seemed to have reached a dead end. Demands came to the fore once more for more aggressive action, including the forcible occupation of the temple. When Gandhi heard of this, he decided to go to Vykom himself. He managed to persuade the authorities to remove the barricades and allow a group of 15 protestors to sit by the road. The Travancore government then offered to have three of the four roads opened to all. The satyagrahis refused this offer; all four roads must be opened. No attempt was then made to stop entry to the three roads, and it became clear after some time that they had, in effect, become accessible to all. The government claimed in late 1925 that as all the roads, except for one small lane that allowed access to the temple, had been opened; the satyagrahis had gained their main objective. Gandhi accepted this, arguing that the campaign had succeeded and should now be called off. In fact, the temple priests had constructed an entirely new road to the entrance which only caste Hindus were allowed to use. Following Gandhi's advice, the campaign was called off on 23 November 1925.

King quotes the Kerala historian T K Ravindran, who in a 1973 book argued:

> After 20 months of relentless fight, Congress withdrew from the scene with its finery torn, and its prestige tarnished, leaving the cause of the depressed classes at the same spot whence they picked it up in March 1924 (p 213).

King argues that in fact the movement had challenged the institution of untouchability in ways from which it would not recover. Following K M Panikkar, she observes that the initial challenge to deeply entrenched prejudices is often the hardest, and even a small victory is highly significant. The Vykom Satyagraha focused India's attention on the issue of untouchability, and showed that Gandhi was prepared to back their agitations for access to religious sites. Gandhi played up the positive message of the movement, stating in a speech in Alleppey in 1927 that the agreement at Vykom provided "a bedrock of freedom" that was a step on the path to the eventual liberty of the community.

Vykom indeed inaugurated an ongoing struggle in Kerala. Demands were made for access to the roads around other Hindu temples in Travancore, and Gandhi was called in again to mediate between protestors and the state authorities. There was widespread agitation by nationalist activists, who put on street theatre performances to spread the anti-untouchability message. Although initially they had limited success, the Travancore government ruled in the mid-1930s that all public roads, wells, water tanks and lodges that it maintained from state funds should be open to all communities. Nonetheless, many important temples remained closed to Dalits.

A Narrow View of Civil Rights

A key element in Gandhi's whole approach was to make this an issue for Hindus alone to decide amongst themselves. As he had stated at the Belgaum Congress session of 1924:

> Untouchability is another hindrance to swaraj. Its removal is just as essential for swaraj as the attainment of Hindu-Muslim unity. This is an essentially Hindu question and Hindus cannot claim or take swaraj till they have restored the liberty of the suppressed classes (Gandhi 1967c: 479).

He went on to observe that the higher castes had, above all, to purify themselves by abandoning the practice of untouchability. They should, therefore, campaign to change the minds of the orthodox. When George Joseph, a Syrian Christian from Travancore, took a leading role in the protest, Gandhi wrote to him on 6 April 1924:

> As to Vykom, I think that you should let the Hindus do the work. It is they who have to purify themselves. You can help by your sympathy and by your pen, but not by organising the movement and certainly not by offering satyagraha. If you refer to the Congress resolution of Nagpur, it calls upon the Hindu members to remove the curse of untouchability (Gandhi 1967a: 391).

He went on to note that the Syrian Christians themselves discriminated against Christians who came from an untouchable background; the implication being that Joseph should divert his energies to campaigning on this issue. Joseph, however, continued to participate actively in the Vykom Satyagraha.

Commenting on this, King notes that the issue was primarily that of the civil rights of all people, regardless of religion, sect or community, to have access to public spaces. This certainly was how George Joseph viewed the matter at the time. She also comments that almost all

modern proponents of unarmed forms of resistance insist on the central importance of building the widest possible basis of support. Restricting protest to just one religious group is tactically inadvisable. The society as a whole should be mobilised against injustices that, as a rule, cut across sectarian and religious divides. This was certainly the case in South Asia, a region in which no religion was free from the iniquity of untouchability.

Gandhi's stance also implied that the lower classes should rely largely on the higher caste's fight against untouchability, rather than on their own agency in the matter. These shortcomings in Gandhi's position were ones that B R Ambedkar was to expose remorselessly over the next two decades. Although Ambedkar, then a relatively unknown Dalit lawyer, was initially impressed by the Vykom campaign, describing it in 1924 as "the most important event in the country today" for his community, he noted that the Brahmins of Kerala sought to legitimise their stance by appealing to their scriptures. He began to call upon his adherents to reject all Hindu texts that valorised untouchability and by 1927 was organising public burnings of the *Manusmriti*. For Ambedkar, it was more important to strengthen the resolve of the Dalits by such means, rather than try to win the sympathy of the oppressor. He believed that the higher castes would only change if made to do so by pressure from below that both undermined their position and forced the state to step in to actively enforce Dalit civil rights.

Gandhi claimed of the satyagrahis at this time that "their uniform courtesy towards the opponents to reform will break the edge of the opposition" (Gandhi 1967d: 438). As King notes (p 232), Gandhi believed very strongly that the oppressor could be won over through the self-sacrifice and suffering of the oppressed in a way that pierces what Joan Bondurant has called their "rational defences" and achieve a "catharsis" (1958: 228). She does not believe that the history of Vykom bears this claim out. Rather, it revealed one serious defect in Gandhi's way of thinking, namely his

> erroneous belief that the suffering of the satyagrahis could sway the sentiments of those who for generations had immunities and benefits bestowed on them as high-caste landholders. If anything, Vykom proved that the satyagrahis' appeals and suffering were insufficient to produce immediately responsive social change. Much more pressure would be required (p 232).

Martin Luther King and Gandhi

This issue—that of a change of heart that could theoretically be brought about through exemplary non-violence was also one of great concern to Martin Luther King. Initially, he followed Gandhi in believing in the efficacy of non-violence in this respect. There were indeed a few cases in which Southern white racists changed their minds in sympathy with the strength of feeling displayed by the civil rights activists; a notable instance being the public change-of-heart of the mayor of Nashville during the lunch-counter strike of 1960 (Ackerman and DuVall 2000: 326–28).

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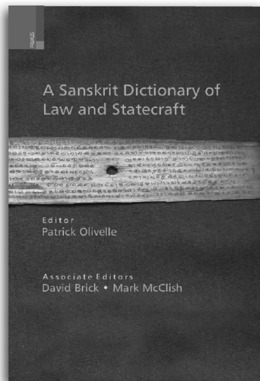

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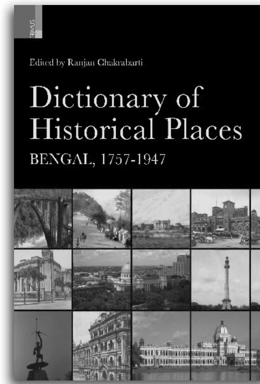

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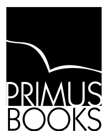

Nonetheless, by 1963 Martin Luther King had come to see that such cases were the exception rather than the rule. This understanding informed his angry "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" of April 1963, written in response to eight prominent "liberal" Protestant, Catholic and Jewish clergymen who had criticised him for provoking civil disorder. He denounced with cold fury the way that white people constantly told the African Americans to be patient, while at the same time discriminating against them in the vilest ways. He expressed grave disappointment with the white "moderates" who were more devoted to "order" than justice; their bland "goodwill" was for him more dangerous than the rabid racism of the Ku Klux Klan. They failed to see that the ills needed to be exposed to the harsh light of day before they could be repressed. As he stated:

> History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups are more immoral than individuals (King 1991: 292).

Martin Luther King now saw that the suffering endured by himself and his supporters was most effective not in the impact it had on Southern whites, but on a wider American public opinion. Television pictures of the police brutality in Birmingham eventually moved the US federal government to send in troops to enforce the civil rights of African Americans, and then legislate to enshrine such rights in law. In other words, the wider conscience of national opinion had to be brought to bear on local oppressors who would not willingly change their beliefs and ways of life.

'Pressure of Public Opinion'

In this book, Mary King examines this issue only in the context of the Vykom Satyagraha. Was Gandhi more successful in India on some other occasions? We may point, for example, to his engagement with some hardened communalists in 1947–48, such as the Prime Minister of Bengal during partition, H S Suhrawardy, who admitted his culpability in provoking earlier riots (Dalton 1993: 235, note 96), and the people of Delhi who fraternised with each other across communal boundaries after being moved by Gandhi's last fast of January 1948 (Pandey 2001: 143–44).

These are, without doubt, remarkable cases, but Vykom suggests that these were the exception rather than the rule. In general, he failed to win the hearts and minds of his communally-minded opponents, whether of the Hindu rights or of the Muslim separatists. He also alienated Ambedkar and his Dalit supporters by his methods, notably by the Pune fast of 1932. As for his imperial opponents, Kathryn Tidrick has argued:

> it is remarkable ...how morally unmoved the British hierarchy in India seems to have been at the time by civil disobedience: if British officials found it morally painful to see Indians breaking the law and suffering for it, by and large they succeeded in keeping the fact to themselves (Tidrick 1990: 233–34).

She notes that while Gandhi could rely on British scruples for his own personal safety, he could not count on it for political concessions. The real challenge that Gandhi mounted was not to the conscience of the British, but to their authority. Besides the challenge to the institutional authority of the British posed by civil disobedience, Gandhi also challenged their "monopoly over the force of personality." It was here that the British appreciated him as a worthy adversary. He had the charismatic authority that the British had claimed in their heroic years of personal administration in the 19th century, but could do so now "only in fantasy."

The record, therefore, appears to reinforce King's point; Gandhian-style nonviolent methods rarely won over the immediate adversary. Where his techniques were successful was in the way they polarised opinion, with those who were hitherto unconcerned or sitting on the fence coming over to the side of the protestors. Once those who had power realised that they were losing control over this centre-ground, they were prepared to negotiate and make whatever concessions were needed to stop the protest. Vykom bore this out well. The growing support from people in Travancore and adjoining regions of South India eventually forced the hand of a government that had hitherto not wanted to put pressure on the orthodox Hindus. Also, the presence of Gandhi made a big difference. The Travancore state would look bad in the eyes of the world if it sent him packing on a matter of such obvious civil justice.

King points out that, by this stage of the campaign, Gandhi was insisting that it was only through the "pressure of public opinion" that the roads around the temple would be opened (Gandhi 1967d: 304). Here, he was showing a sophisticated appreciation of the way that the power of protest could be used to force a capitulation on the unwilling, and downplay the role of moral suasion. This, it appears, is the more important lesson that King believes we should take from Vykom.

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