

Dissecting Memory/Challenging the Narrative: Mary Edward King's Appraisal of Gandhian Struggle at Vykom

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

Special Issue: 1

Month: October

Year: 2025

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Citation:

Suresh, KN. "Dissecting Memory/Challenging the Narrative: Mary Edward King's Appraisal of Gandhian Struggle at Vykom." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 13, no. S1, 2025, pp. 25–29.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v13iS1-Oct.9850>

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Abstract

Often hailed as a watershed moment in India's struggle against untouchability and as a triumph of the Gandhian mode of struggle rooted firmly on the pillars of truth, love and nonviolence, the 1924-25 Vykom Satyagraha was purported to annihilate caste differences and eliminate the evil practices of untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability. A narrative that emerged in no time after the end of the struggle corroborated M.K. Gandhi's claim that the "sheer force of character and suffering" of the campaigners would effect a change of heart in the dominant castes, making them not only to reduce the severity of casteist practices but also willing participants in the campaign for social equality.

This paper proposes to read Mary Elizabeth King's Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India: The 1924-25 Vykom Satyagraha and the Mechanisms of Change (2015) to challenge this simplistic narrative, to posit the notion that conversion is rarely a mechanism of change and to unravel the inadequacies in the leadership Gandhi provided to the struggle. The methodology adopted would be interdisciplinary and would employ the tools of historiographical and political-theoretical analysis.

Keywords: Vykom, Satyagraha, Untouchability, Gandhi, Nonviolence.

Resolution of conflicts, historically, has been achieved by varied means including compromise or struggle. Those conflicts that impinge on the independence and self-respect of people, and their capacity to determine their future are typically resolved by struggle, especially in the absence, or the inadequacy, of institutional mechanisms. Often the choice left in such conflicts is between surrendering abjectly to power, or resorting to violence designed to kill, maim, destroy or terrorize the opposing party. However, recognising the inefficacy of violence in resolving crucial conflicts, nonviolent action has been used in all parts of the world right from ancient Rome to the American Civil Rights Movement, India's struggle for Independence, the Czech and Slovak resistance to Russian invasion, the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa and the ongoing struggle in Myanmar to reclaim democracy. Underlying all these movements is the belief that the dominant opponent can be defeated or controlled by withholding such consent of the ruled as is needed for power to be exercised on them. The advocates of nonviolent action, recognizing the need to wield power to control threatening political groups or regimes, deploy social power to control the behaviour of the other through people's action. Nonviolent action is based on the view that power is pluralistic and that political power

depends on many groups for reinforcing its sources. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the best-known apostle and the most outstanding strategist of nonviolent action, considered his *satyagraha* mode of struggle to have the greatest potential to secure real freedom and justice, and he transformed the power equations between the imperial power and the dominion/colony into negotiations between equals.

Gene Sharp, in *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, likens nonviolent action to a means of combat where “battles” are waged using “wise strategy and tactics, and demands of its ‘soldiers’ courage, discipline, and sacrifice” (67). He credits Gandhi to have broadened the character of the nonviolent technique and refined its practice by using an armoury of nonviolent methods, and consciously bringing together mass political action and the norm of nonviolence. The Vykom Satyagraha (1924-25) is a well-known local use of Gandhi’s method by his supporters to have the streets around the famous temple of that town opened to all people irrespective of their caste. The twenty-month long nonviolent struggle in the small town of Vykom in erstwhile Travancore in what would be Kerala post-Independence was basically against the practice of untouchability and unapproachability. Accounts about this struggle idealised it as one in which the hearts and minds of the targeted opponent were converted to such an extent that they came round to accept the viewpoint of the lower castes and the outcastes. Thus, the struggle came to be construed as a test case of Gandhi’s idea that *satyagraha* entails conversion and not coercion. A long line of Gandhi scholars eulogised Gandhi’s involvement and accepted the foregoing narration. Sharp, for instance, writes:

... the orthodox Hindus changed their attitude. After sixteen months the Brahmans said: “We cannot any longer resist the prayers that have been made to us, and we are ready to receive the untouchables.” The case had widespread reverberations throughout India, it is reported, assisting in the removal of similar restrictions elsewhere and strengthening significantly the cause of caste reform. (83)

Writing more than half-a-century later, Mary Elizabeth King attributes such narratives to the lack of access in the mid-twentieth century to archival materials that reveal the minds of the participants in the action, and attempts to revise the memory of the satyagraha and the narrative by revisiting the historical record of the Vykom struggle and examining the trope of conversion-through-suffering that animates the Gandhian methodology. Drawing on an extensive on-the-field research of primary and secondary sources, and interviews, King argues that the satyagraha at Vykom influenced neutral public opinion, drew attention from across the borders of Travancore, and won certain civil rights to untouchables and lower castes; however, there was no change of heart among the dominant Brahmans in their approach or attitude towards the untouchables. Thus, King cuts the ground from under Gandhi’s belief that the opposition could be won over by persistent, pure and suffering love, and cautions that such belief could be very costly in terms of human lives.

In her book, King gives a vivid description of the erstwhile princely state of Travancore, run by a sophisticated royalty and the rich and powerful Nambudiri brahmans. The state practised a very rigid and complicated caste system which had no parallel anywhere else in India. The unchallenged Brahmin hegemony was buttressed by their holding a major share of the land in the state which was not owned by the government. King quotes P. Chandramohan to contend that Travancore practised the triple evils of “untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability” (26). Caste prohibitions and ideological justification thereof excluded the untouchables from approaching public spaces especially temples from even faraway. However, the rulers of Travancore attempted to bring about some reforms even before the state came under British suzerainty in 1788. Modern English education and missionary activities which came in the wake of British dominance, and the sovereigns’ investment in education, infrastructure and public institutions ensured that by the 1890s Travancore had a western-educated elite and a thriving middle class that began to upset the Brahmin hegemony. King posits the awakening of the Ezhava community as a testimonial to how a rigid, exclusionary caste system can be shaken at its foundations by educational and economic advancement. This community had galvanised itself right in the late nineteenth century under the inspiring leadership of Dr Palpu, Kumaran Asan and Sri Narayana Guru. Early Ezhava efforts for socio-religious reforms were

through persuasive methods of petitioning, documentation and organising nonviolent protest actions. Guru's setting up of temples and the hermitage, and the establishment of the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) created an awakening in the community which would be used later by leaders such as T.K. Madhavan and C. Keshavan for extensive political change. The demand for the Dalits for access to public roads was also gaining traction under the leadership of Ayyankali, the leader of the Pulayas. The educated, tax-paying middle class Ezhavas led a number of movements threatening the economic stability of the state. The government was forced to open all roads to all in 1865, but backed down later due to pressure from the upper castes. In the 1920s, when the government was already under pressure from the conversion of lower castes to Christianity and by the politicisation of Buddhists and Muslims, the young Ezhava leader T.K. Madhavan involved upper caste Hindus and Syrian Christians to demand equal rights for Dalits. His meeting with Gandhi, who had at that time returned to India from South Africa and was perfecting the technique of satyagraha, resulted in Gandhi's launching a limited satyagraha at Vykom under his supervisorship.

Examining the satyagraha from various angles, King notes that Vykom was the apt choice for the struggle to open all roads for the Dalits. The temple town preserved the evils of untouchability and unapproachability rigorously; and hundreds of outcastes had allegedly been killed for trying to approach the temple. Launched on March 30, 1924, the satyagraha was led by prominent leaders from across castes and religions, and began with volunteers approaching the temple barriers in a disciplined manner, following the instructions of Gandhi meticulously. An extremely cautious Gandhi, however, tried to restrict the number of volunteers to prevent any violence. Soon the satyagrahis were joined by prominent Syrian Christian and Muslim leaders from Kerala, a group of Akalis from Punjab and some African American leaders from the US. However, King asserts that Gandhi saw the Vykom Satyagraha only as a Hindu, from within the Hindu community. She writes:

The role of Gandhi was complex, contradictory, and even perplexing at this stage ... Gandhi did not want the higher castes to have any opening to claim that people of other faiths wanted to weaken Hinduism. He also wanted to reclaim the untouchables not solely for Hinduism, but for the larger project rejuvenating Hindu cultural nationalism. (120-1)

Gandhi feared that the nationalist struggle would suffer if the upper caste Hindus and the royalty were alienated. However, hundreds of satyagrahis followed his instructions, stood rooted to the spot, in near starvation, braving deadly epidemics and even during the floods of 1924. Even as the *savarnas* intensified their opposition to the untouchables, Gandhi stuck to the belief that the sufferings of the *avarnas* would convert the upper castes. His unwavering stance even when the satyagrahis were brutalised by the upper caste goons and the police alienated leaders—like George Joseph and E.V Ramaswamy Naicker—from other communities. Sri Narayana Guru, too, expressed his displeasure that Gandhi had not permitted the satyagrahis to even cross the barriers set up by the police near the temples. Finally, the Vykom satyagraha ended on November 23, 1925 with a compromise reached among the government, the satyagrahis and the upper castes. Three of the four roads surrounding the temple were opened to the Dalits and a parallel route was set up along the fourth side. King calls this a “minimal success” and that too, not on account of the satyagraha:

Whatever concessions occurred were not as a result of the persuasion, or conversion, of the orthodox Hindus, but, rather, capitulation by the local Travancore government. The final settlement is the most controversial aspect of the entire chronicle, the tentacles of which reach into contemporary debates worldwide on how to plan and aim for effective nonviolent civil resistance. (211)

The government was forced to come to a settlement because of a large array of causes including the wider anti-untouchability movement, spread of modern western education, rising middle classes, law and order issues, increasing Ezhava economic clout, fear of mass conversions by untouchables to other religions and royal intervention; and not because of a change of heart among the upper castes. King comments:

... the government's response was only a managerial contrivance to alleviate a situation that was

oppressive to a high percentage of the population and to mitigate the unrest resulting from the prolonged effort to correct the injustice. The modest concession of a compromise—masquerading as change, in fact sleight of hand—to ameliorate the pressures on lower-caste and untouchable people cannot be considered “resolution” of this conflict. Its ethical ramifications, however, laid the groundwork for future fights, struggles, developments, and advances. (217)

Analysing the significance, the successes and failures of the satyagraha and by extension Gandhi’s leadership, King writes that the Vykom Satyagraha was the first major social campaign in India that was based on Gandhian principles. Consensus, mobilization, public opinion, political debate and action, and cooperation between people of all castes and religions were all incorporated into it. Despite Gandhi’s assertion that it was anything but a religious struggle, it attracted sympathy within the country and outside. The campaign delivered a jolt to upper caste orthodoxy and it inspired later social justice movements in Kerala, India and the world. However, the fact remains that the restrictions imposed by Gandhi affected the impact of the struggle and, consequently, the untouchables had to wait for a long time before their just demands were met. Gandhi’s leadership prevented Vykom from being expanded into a mobilization for democracy, which could have coherently addressed caste within a larger context. King states that “Gandhi and the Congress may have contributed to a prolongation of the untouchability conflict in Travancore by concentrating on it as a single-issue campaign in Vykom” (227). Nevertheless, King argues that “Vykom could have been a fiasco” (229) but for the involvement of Gandhi and of the Congress. At the same time, the satyagraha impacted Gandhi himself, says King who opines that Gandhi realized the folly of his dogmatic belief in spiritual conversion and that he subsequently became more malleable. While King acknowledges Gandhian satyagraha to be a great revolutionary weapon, she accuses Gandhi of setting a wrong precedent through excessive deference to the royalty and the upper castes, and his failure to apply the various potent weapons of civil disobedience and non-cooperation at Vykom. King affirms that the failures of the satyagraha hold valuable lessons for such movements across the world.

Mary Edward King uses the methodology of political science to dissect the construction of memory and nationalistic hagiography that accord an exalted position to Gandhi and his conviction of the efficacy of his principles to bring about social change through conversion. These have also led to the obfuscation of the flaws in Gandhi’s leadership at Vykom. Sean Chabot sees King to have been encouraged by the views of Gene Sharp in her argument that civil resistance campaigns have to aim for accommodation, nonviolent coercion and nonviolent disintegration. Her attempt is to deploy Sharp’s dispassionate yet systematic concepts to demolish the dynamics of Gandhian nonviolent action, with its rich array of resistance techniques and experiments with self-rule. Chabot feels that in her eagerness to apply “dominant and Eurocentric scientific standards for determining truth”, King ignores the very different worldview and epistemological perspective that have shaped Gandhi’s thoughts, words and deeds.

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