ABSTRACT

Kerala is known for its radical social reform movements and progressive legislations. The present study explores the concept and practice of Satyagraha as a technique that provides solutions to the age-old social unrest for establishing social justice and equality in a caste-stratified society.

History passed through gruesome phases to attain its present tranquility. Kerala society had been split into savarnas and avarnas, the terms referring to the higher castes and the lower castes respectively. Obnoxious social practices—untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability—existed. The social customs known as Kerala acharams reigned supreme and this reduced the avarnas to mute slaves of the upper segments. Education, being a powerful means to overcome social inequalities, was deliberately denied to the majority. Social justice and civic rights were a mirage.

English education opened a new horizon. The universal outlook brought by English education upturned the social proposition. Human rights and individual dignity hounded the conscience of the educated of all castes. A strong desire to end the age-old caste oppressions sprouted among them.

The rising economic boom, the possibility to acquire and own assets, improved communications and infrastructure fuelled the desire further. As a result caste associations were formed in Kerala. This improved the status of the different communities and enlightened the masses. Unfortunately,
caste associations remained parallel and mutually antagonistic rather than converging towards a common cause. The strife continued unabated.

The emergence of Mahatma Gandhi in Indian politics brought about a new dimension and momentum in the National Movement. His passionate urge appealed to the elite segments and the unprivileged populace with equal fervour. From the strength of his aura sprouted hopes for others to break free from fetters that shackled their limbs and lives.

Mahatma Gandhi blamed Kerala as the darkest spot of the untouchability map in India and solicited purification and penance on the part of the so called higher castes and prayed for their ‘change of heart’. Through Satyagraha Gandhi made great strides in persuading warring social groups to harmonize their differences. As a consequence, philanthropists and philosophers of all sections acted in unison.

In fact, the forces of social uprising in Kerala went through a collective and peaceful revolution under the influence of Gandhian methods and practices which acted as a catalyst for social renaissance.

In Kerala, even though the satyagrahis and the philanthropists won the battle for social justice, the social reformers failed to remove the debris of the old social order in the post-Gandhian era. As a result, the once abandoned orthodox thinking is sneaking back steadily. Different caste groups are building isolated strongholds. Political and social wisdom is relegated. Religious fundamentalism is back. There are subtle fears and strife everywhere. Peace is longed for.

When inequalities polarize, the society is in crisis and it is time to adopt the Gandhian methodology to overcome it.
Since the society comprises of individuals, resolutions lie in addressing issues at the individual level. Satyagraha seeks to ‘change hearts’ at the individual level to attain a changed order at the community level.

The study is descriptive, analytical and critical in approach. Interpretation is primarily based on documentary evidences. Both primary and secondary sources have been carefully examined and subjected to internal and external criticism. The study is structured under seven chapters and they are arranged thematically and chronologically. Care has been taken to make the study objective and impartial.

The researcher concludes that Mahatma Gandhi advocated ‘change of heart’ as the only remedy. ‘Change of heart’ can work miracles in all societies. It can be applied universally from families to the entire world. A situation where the oppressor and oppressed join hands is still an elusive dream. But, it is feasible through Satyagraha. Hence, the study becomes significant from this perspective.