The Doctoral thesis, “Satyagraha and Anti-Untouchability Movement In Kerala - Its Relevance to Current Day Society” owes its origin to the Gandhian ideology, particularly its unparalleled effectiveness in resolving social conflicts. The thesis explores the concept and practice of Satyagraha as a vital force behind the progressive social legislations in Kerala.

History is abound with praise for heroes who pioneered violent victories. But Mahatma’s victory stands out unique in that it shed no blood and scarred no generation. The charismatic leader who had mobilized the masses and ousted rival forces achieved it through peaceful ways - the Satyagraha. Unlike his counterparts, this leader abstained from the use of violence, barbarism and bloodshed. Instead, he adopted a humane technique for liberating the oppressed - the Satyagraha. The effect was astounding. The powerful preacher brought the diverse factions of the entire Indian sub-continent under one umbrella to fight unitedly for the national cause.

One defining victory the twentieth century witnessed was by Americans in World War II using nuclear bombardment - a horror that continues to haunt generations. To the contrary, the liberation of India from British rule was achieved through peaceful non-violent demonstrations or
the Satyagraha. Weapons and force bring temporary victories. But the lasting solution lies in peaceful means of dealing with the problems. Satyagraha is the vindications of this great truth.

Kerala, located on the southern tip of Indian peninsula is a blend of marvels. It also harbours country’s rich cultural heritage and a colourful history of progressive reforms and social refinement. Its literacy level rates the nation’s highest. Myriad communities co-exist here in perfect harmony and peace.

But there was a time when this was not quite so. History passed through gruesome phases to attain its present tranquility. In fact, Kerala of late nineteenth century was ridden with obnoxious religious and social practices. Society then, stood split into two broad classes - the savarnas or-the privileged higher caste and avarnas - those of the lower caste. The Brahmins were at the helm of the savarna hierarchy which extended down from Nambudiris to Nairs while the avarnas ranged from Ezhavas to Pulayas, Parayas, Nayadis etc.... the untouchables. Religious teachings took a backseat and savarnas imposed stringent social norms that ruled the land.

Caste-based norms grew stronger and stronger with untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability imposed strictly on the avarnas. The
practice reduced them to mute slaves of the higher echelons without a hope for change. ‘Spiritual merits’ earned or unearned in previous births were cited as reasons for one’s caste status - its privileges or sufferings. This horrid state of human slavery and taboo continued for centuries... that's until English education swept in.

Colonisation, exposure to English lifestyle, their education system - all stirred up a vague dissent and an arousal to break free from age-old oppression. Rising economic boom, the possibility to earn and own properties, improved communication, infrastructure - fuelled the desire further. Yes, revolution was in the air. As a result caste associations were formed in Kerala as part of self-advancement. These caste associations improved the status of their respective communities and created public opinion against the customs and practices. In spite of mutual jealousy, suspicion and increased inter-caste rivalries the strife continued unabated. The hope for unification seemed impossible.

Mahatma Gandhi - whose call for freedom movement was creating waves at this time, spiraled fight against untouchability to national levels. Campaigns and marches awakened masses to the evils of caste-based oppressions. ‘Each of us bears origin to one supreme creator. We are born equal. And of what worth freedom from the British be if we are enslaved by
atrocities of caste-kings’? Gandhiji ignited public minds to think on these lines.

Gandhiji’s own taste of discrimination traces to South Africa where he practised Law. There, the native Africans and migrant Asians were considered inferior by the South African Government - the whites. Colour and descent pushed non-whites out of the mainstream destroying their self-esteem and morale over time. The sufferings they were subjected to, bore horrid resemblance to the lives of the untouchables in India. Gandhi, resolved to abolish this evil - man made untouchability that sets man against his brother.

Since the dawn of civilization, Indian culture grew and prospered preaching message of peace. Customs, rituals and way of life here embody the spirit of brotherhood, non-violence and peace. Our sages, our epics, our religious leaders preserved this spirit. So when problem arose, quest for peaceful resolution rose above all in the minds of the public.

Gandhi took pride in Hinduism. Even so he considered untouchability a blot on Hinduism. This religious blot called for a cleansing, he said. Purification in the attitude of the so called higher caste was needed. An ancient aberration still exists. But we owed a penance for its abolition, he
implored. The task wouldn’t be easy and Gandhi was aware of it. In *Young India* he wrote:

“This removal of untouchability is much more than building a temple of brick and mortar. Hindus must bleed for it, must pay for it. They must be prepared to forsake wife, children and all for the sake of removing the curse.”

Hindu orthodoxy was understandably outraged by Gandhi, especially his public proclamation that untouchability wasn’t vital to Hinduism but an ‘excrecence, plague and blot!’ Unmindful, Gandhi continued his fight for equality. He called the *avarnas* ‘Harijans’ or Children of God. He called for unification: a togetherness by rising above caste barriers to overthrow the mighty intruder, the British. Since the wish for freedom was a shared sentiment, people sidelined loyalties of family, caste, religion to join the movement. Greater awareness and education strengthened the spirit of freedom. Despite suffering rigors of the British rule, it seemed hard for our people to give-up caste-based prejudices. Divisions grew deeper and it helped the infamous British policy of ‘divide and rule’.

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’. It
was at this juncture that T.K. Madhavan, social reformer, discovered Gandhi’s call as platform to unite and gain a dignified existence.

Incidentally, T. K. Madhavan was also a disciple of Sree Narayana Guru, the reformer saint of Kerala. He met Mahatma Gandhi at Thirunelveli. In his book he reminiscenced:

“As I sat down, Mahatmaji inched a foot closer. A strange feel enveloped me all over. Yogic Gurus speak of such a magnetic pull, transportation to a higher world - that occurs in close proximity to ‘Great Souls’. And now, I was convinced of that truth. I remember, how each time I entered the awesome aura of Sree Narayana Guruji’s presence, a mystic feel would wave into me sprouting thoughts - saintly and pure. Seated beside Mahatmaji today, I experienced the very same sensation. I looked deep into those eyes that seemed to say “Trust me child. I love you'. And warmth of that faint smile backed that assurance. I felt liberated, truly free indeed. Free in spirit... free to speak withholdings of my tom mind.”

Slowly and steadily, the non-violent uprisings spread to varied parts of the country. In line with this Gandhian principle, the 1920’s Vaikam Satyagraha—the civil-rights movement in Kerala caught national attention. In those days, the roads around Siva temple at Vaikam in the Kottayam District were not accessible to avarnas of Hindu community while non-
Hindus faced no such restriction. Swami Vivekananda was to denounce this ridiculousness in his words thus:

“Was there ever a sillier thing before in the world than what I saw in Malabar country? The poor Pariah is not allowed to pass through the same street as the high-caste man, but if he changes his name to a hodge-podge English name, it is allright; or to a Mohammedan name, it is allright. What inference would you draw except that these Malabaris are all lunatics, their homes so many lunatic asylums, and that they are to be treated with derision by every race in India until they mend their manners and know better. Shame upon them that such wicked and diabolical customs are allowed.”

Vaikam Satyagraha was conducted for a whole year before Travancore administration caved in under pressure and signed a formal pact with Gandhi to throw-open the roads to *avarnas* and all. Gandhi termed the agreement as “bed rock of freedom”.

The victory of Vaikam Satyagraha was a turning point. Freedom to use roads around the temple now emboldened social reformers to ask for next - the all-important Temple Entry. The Guruvayur Satyagraha in 1931 was a surge in this direction. Though not successful initially, it shook the grips of Hindu orthodoxy and paved the way for the ‘Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936’. 

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SURVEY OF LITERATURE

No study of Gandhi’s life and principles would be complete without reading his autobiography. The literature brings to light the full meaning of Satyagraha. Accounts of *Satyagraha in South Africa, Young India, Harijan* etc. provides deep insight into Gandhi’s philosophies, his concept of God and commitment to non-violence.

A long array of books on Gandhi’s life has been compiled by several luminaries. Each seeks to explore different perspectives of Gandhian ideology.


Kazhinjakalam by K.P. Kesava Menon etc, provided a detailed description of the traditional Kerala society as well as information on the socio-political movements in the Kerala society. The systems and customs of nineteenth century Kerala society have been elaborated in these books.

The researcher also came across some of the most significant studies on Kerala History. Missionaries and a Hindu State-Travancore 1858-1936 by Koji Kawashima, Eight Furlongs of Freedom by T.K. Ravindran, Jathivyavasthithiyum Kerala Charithravum by P.K. Balakrishnan, The Decline of Nair Dominance by Robin Jeffrey etc. furnished information regarding caste, customs and educational progress achieved by the Kerala society.

Strictly speaking, the above studies focus only on some individual aspects of life in Kerala. The role of Gandhian ideals that helped to unite the segregated social segments remains to be studied yet.

**NEED OF THE STUDY**

Knowing the past is important to understand the present as also to decide for the future. In fact, past is never totally past. It runs subtly through the present and moulds the making of tomorrow.

In the past, several other ideologies had arisen in an effort to resolve
basic human problems or conflicts. A few succeeded partially while others failed. Some resolutions proved bloody while some of them remains as injurious and self-defeating. The Communist ideology was mooted to bring about social and economic equality. It attacked free-economy, empires erected on exploitation. However capitalism overthrew it.

Today life is changed and fast-paced. Globalisation is sweeping across continents. Like imperialism it breeds unipolar world order and exploitation. With the advancement of science, communications and infrastructure, there is greater freedom along with exposure to the good, bad and ugly. Blind materialistic pursuits are pushing out humaneness from our thinking. There seems to be no room for age-old morals and spirituality. Inequality is rapidly breeding exploitation. The rich became richer and the poor are driven to greater poverty with each passing day. There is subtle fear and strife everywhere. Peace is evasive. A free and equal society is elusive. Peace undoubtedly is the need of the hour. The desire for a peaceful, happy and fair society tugs every human heart today.

Though laws of equality and freedom exist, casteism is returning to be an active element in progressive Kerala society. Worse, the once abandoned orthodox thinking is sneaking in steadily. Society is being hijacked by unprecedented imbalances. Crime and corruption are the order
of the day. The state calls for a cleansing, for a resurrection of peace, equality and harmony. Vaikam and Guruvayur Satyagrahas are striking memory chords. Restlessness is in the air.

A society comprises of individuals. Thus solution lies in addressing issues at the individual level. A disturbed mind reflects as disturbance in society after all. Bloodshed and violent combat are self-defeating. The need of the hour is the revival of Gandhian strategies and methods. Employing peaceful means, engaging in Satyagraha, to awaken the consciousness to preserve peace and to foster equality.

As in all times young blood is the key to change. Sadly, tempting glitter of shallow globalisation is depriving the new generation of enthusiasm, tradition and values. Still if we can work out ways to awaken youth to Gandhian thinking, effective solutions can be hit upon. The poor wouldn’t be oppressed; the rich wouldn’t see success in exploiting the other. Emancipation of women struck new levels under Gandhi’s leadership. Women are to be empowered to lead a dignified existence once again.

In recognition of its contemporary relevance, in the centenary celebration year of Satyagraha 2006, the United Nations General Assembly
declared 2 October, Mahatma Gandhi’s birthday as ‘International Day of Non-Violence’. Hence, the spirit of Satyagraha becomes global. The day will provide platforms across nations to educate young generations on the potential force of love and peace to resolve crises.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The following are the objectives of the study:

■ To examine the socio-political background of the caste-ridden Kerala society during the latter half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries.

* To study the circumstances that forged caste associations which in turn paved the way for social emancipation movements.

■ To understand how the Gandhian concept of Satyagraha activated social reforms in Kerala.

■ To evaluate the Vaikam and the Guruvayur Satyagraha movements, looking closely at the factors that brought about a ‘change of heart’ among the savarnas - the higher caste people.

" To assess the potential of Satyagraha as a practical solution to the problems of current day society.
SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Appealing to fundamental goodness that resides in every human heart is the only means to resolve situations.

Advocation of Satyagraha as an alternative strategy to move masses as it did to overpower mighty evils like colonization.

However till today, no indepth study has been undertaken to assess the impact of Satyagraha as a core strategy to combat social problems in Kerala. This study is an effort in that direction. It seeks to analyze how otherwise mutually hating and jealous parallel movements converged for Satyagraha to attain goals of equality. The study deals with the Satyagraha movements which brought together rival communities, classes and castes to play great role in the making of modem Kerala, to overcome caste impositions and foreign rule.

Hence the study is significant to know our society’s evolution and also to utilize the great potential of Satyagraha to resolve unprecedented social crises we now have. This after all is the need of the hour.

HYPOTHESES

We increasingly witness the purposelessness of violent agitations and wars. They meet some short term gains but the problems continue to
smoulder under to erupt every now and again. It is because a defeat to physical might does not gain acceptance of human minds. A spark of dissent resides to grow among losers and winners are left with a lingering guilty sense and prick of conscience. Opposed to this, Satyagraha victory brings in whole-hearted rejoicing on the winning side and gains approval amidst losers too. Such is the power of this two edged weapon. All are winners.

Gandhi used Satyagraha on national scale and approached the masses with a sure plan of liberation from miseries. He pleaded persistently and worked relentlessly for this. In India and abroad, Gandhian approach is held as a ray of hope. His philosophy seems to be the only panacea. Hence, the researcher has framed the following six hypotheses in this perspective:

1. Satyagraha is a potent yet peaceful method to overcome the brute nature of man. Such a weaponless method of moral warfare is undefeatable.

2. The caste system has created concepts of ‘pollution by presence’ and similar untenable social taboos.

3. Access to knowledge enabled the people to form caste associations which empowered them for collective bargaining and change through reforms.
4. Caste associations remained parallel and mutually antagonistic rather than convergent towards a common cause.

5. Through Satyagraha, Gandhi made great strides in persuading warring social groups to harmonize their differences. As a consequence philanthropists and philosophers of these segregated sections acted in unison.

6. The concept of Satyagraha and its application to removing social disparities are relevant forever.

**METHODOLOGY**

The methodology adopted for this study is highlighting Satyagraha as the most active force in fighting the formidable caste system.

The caste system is a mighty power in a traditional society such as India. This is because, the caste differences and norms are dictates of the religion and hence deep-rooted. A ‘change of heart’ in the society seemed to be the only probable solution and that was indeed wishing the impossible. It was in such times, an age when evils of caste system ruled at the peak that Satyagraha emerged to reform the social order in order to emancipate the unprivileged.

The present study is descriptive, analytical, and critical in approach.
Interpretation is primarily based on documentary evidences. The study runs into five phases excluding introductory part and summing up.

The first phase focuses on socio-economic scenario as in the nineteenth century Kerala. Strange impositions of age-old caste rules enslaved the *avarnas*. Resentment, impossible for centuries, started to take form though in frail margins. With the coming of the British, exposure to English lifestyle and increasing access to education and literature, caste associations took form. Caste leaders helped the strengthening of demand groups and also ushered in greater awareness. However these associations failed to stand in unison and the propagators of evil maintained an upper-hand till Mahatma Gandhi appeared.

**The second phase** of the study analyses the theory and practice of Satyagraha

**The third phase** highlights how Gandhian Satyagraha more specifically the Vaikam Satyagraha held in 1924-25 paved the way for social justice and emancipation. The Vaikam Satyagraha, a calm agitation demanding freedom to use public roads was the first of its kind in India. Based and modelled on Gandhian principles, the suffering satyagrahis ultimately brought a ‘change of heart’ among the conservatives.
The fourth phase of the study revolves around the Guruvayur Satyagraha demanding rights to Temple Entry for all Hindus. Though not a success initially, it sowed the seeds to persist for Temple Entry and jolted the dictates of orthodoxy.

The fifth phase underscores the application and relevance of Satyagraha as an effective technique for social changes.

Since the study requires scrutiny of developments between nineteenth to twenty first centuries, history of Kerala needs closer, comprehensive and critical examination. Suitable hypotheses have been framed and tested wherever necessary. Primary and secondary data are carefully examined. The hypotheses have been framed after exhaustive discussion with freedom fighters, historians, Gandhian scholars, social activists, and also erstwhile leaders. The study has also benefited from interviews conducted with satyagrahis.

The information collected has been synthesised with records before reaching the conclusions.

TOOLS OF DATA COLLECTION

Both primary and secondary sources have been carefully examined, subjecting them to internal and external criticism. Maximum care has been
taken to make the study highly objective and impartial. It would however be
next to impossible to analyse the entire history of Satyagraha in Kerala
starting with Vaikam and Guruvayur demonstrations because complete
coverage is too large to account in a single study. Still a systematic effort
has been made to study the impact of Satyagraha in the evolution of modern
Kerala.

Secondary sources in the form of published works have been used in
this study. Gandhi’s own works discussing the varied facets of Satyagraha,
a list of similar literature, references from state manuals etc. have also
greatly aided this study.

A good volume of secondary data in the form of archival records
were collected from Tamil Nadu State Government Archives, Chennai and
Kerala State Government Archives, Thiruvananthapuram. A large volume
of books were referred to from Gandhigram Rural University Library,
Gandhigram, Kerala University Library Thiruvananthapuram, Mahatma
Gandhi University Library, Kottayam, Appan Thampuran Museum
Library Trichur, Gandhi Memorial Museum Library, Madurai etc.
References were also collected from different libraries established by the
daily news papers.
RESEARCH DESIGN

The text of the thesis is structured in seven chapters.

The first chapter introduces the thesis and concentrates on the socio-political scenario of the study area. Only in the backdrop of this complex societal setting, the study becomes more understandable. Further, the first segment, includes the objectives, scope, hypotheses, methodology and research design.

The second chapter elaborates on the socio-political scenario of ancient Kerala society. The traditional features of the caste system such as the notion of exclusion based on pollution, restrictions on choice of occupation, civil and religious disabilities and privileges of certain groups in the society are thoroughly discussed. The influence of the western education in motivating caste associations is also analysed in detail.

It is true that the anachronistic distinctions which offended the basic dignity of man provoked educated elites in all castes. However, these associations stayed largely divided and mutually jealous. United strength essential for emancipation seemed impossibility. The ushering in of Gandhian aura worked to unite the segregated section and was a big step in this direction.
The third chapter projects Satyagraha as the technique for the social emancipation movements in Kerala. For that it is imperative to study the theoretical framework of Satyagraha. Thus, Satyagraha the sumnum bonum of Gandhian thought is analysed in this chapter.

It speaks about Gandhiji’s concept and practice of Satyagraha both as a way of life and as an instrument of social reform. Gandhi denounced the use of violence. He believed in the fundamental goodness of man. Truth and non-violence are the fundamental principles of Satyagraha. Through Satyagraha, he awakened the conscience of each man and purified his thinking. Hence, Satyagraha in its theoretical framework is to be examined for a better understanding of the social emancipation movement in the Kerala society.

The fourth chapter examines the famous Vaikam Satyagraha, the pioneer movement, initiated in Kerala for a simple civil right - the freedom to walk through public roads. The majority, considered ‘pollutants’ were kept out of public roads in those days. Gandhi urged the savarnas to take responsibility of ensuring social justice. Avarnas took to Satyagraha and their demonstrations of sufferings finally paved the way for the ‘change of heart’ among savarnas. The use of public roads became a possibility for avarnas at last. The history of the Vaikam Satyagraha and the struggles
initiated by the philanthropists to win it, is dealt with exhaustively in this chapter.

The fifth chapter highlights the efforts undertaken by the reformists for the Temple Entry. Guruvayur temple, the sanctum sanctorum of the savarna privileges was not accessible to the avarnas for a long time. Approaching the temple itself was forbidden. The satyagrahis under the leadership of K. Kelappan made great strides in persuading the savarna leaders to open the temple to all Hindus. The Guruvayur Satyagraha is examined in the context of Gandhian ideals in this chapter.

The sixth chapter makes an analysis of the entire social emancipation movement of Kerala from a Gandhian perspective.

Deep divisions and rivalry are the curses of Kerala society today. This chapter recounts how Gandhi, with the technique of Satyagraha made great strides in persuading separated and excluded social groups to harmonize differences for the common good. After a careful study of the movement, this chapter also explains the relevance of Satyagraha in the current day Kerala scenario.

The last chapter concludes the thesis and presents the important findings of the study. It presents Satyagraha as a strategy to attain goals in
all societies. The role of Satyagraha as a corrective force in the social perspective is highlighted. In essence, it is reform through consensus.

Meticulous care has been exercised to substantiate the hypotheses in a systematic and scientific manner. Suggestions for further areas of investigation have also been incorporated. The researcher is confident that the study thoroughly analyses the role of Satyagraha as a cementing factor in a split stratified society and hope this will be studied by the future generations.
NOTES AND REFERENCES

