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Above: The author (right) at work in the archives of the Mathrubhumi newspaper, Calicut (Kozhikode), Kerala, with historian Vasu Thilleri, doing research that resulted in this chronicle from 1920s south India (photo courtesy of the author).

Jacket design: Ajanta Guhathakurta

King's book is remarkable for its quality of research, fairness of approach, and depth of analysis. I know no other work on the Vykom satyagraha that comes anywhere near it. Its value is not limited to that particular historical event as it offers powerful theoretical and practical insights into Gandhi's science of satyagraha itself. Probing him from a novel perspective and highlighting both the strengths and limitations of his religious approach to political issues, it is a most welcome addition to the large and growing literature on Gandhi and deserves to be widely read and discussed.

Bhikhu Parekh

(In his foreword to the book)

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KING

**GANDHIAN NONVIOLENT STRUGGLE
AND UNTOUCHABILITY IN SOUTH INDIA**

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Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India

The 1924–25 Vykom
Satyagraha and
the Mechanisms
of Change

MARY ELIZABETH KING

with a foreword by **Bhikhu Parekh**

In the 1920s, in the south Indian village of Vykom, a nonviolent struggle sought to open to everyone the roads surrounding the Brahmin temple there. For centuries, any person or animal could walk those roads but not the so-called untouchable Hindus, whose use of the roads would “pollute” the high castes. From April 1924 to November 1925, Gandhi waged a satyagraha to put an end to this blatant discrimination.

Gandhi believed that the Vykom struggle would eliminate severe practices of untouchability, unapproachability, and unseeability, as the nonviolent activists would “convert” the high castes “by sheer force of character and suffering.” Within a decade of the Vykom campaign, a narrative emerged that corroborated Gandhi's beliefs and cited the success of the satyagraha as testimony to his methods.

This mythic narrative has persisted to this day; yet fresh evidence presented by King shows that Gandhi's confidence was misguided, and the volunteers' suffering was ineffective in “converting” the upper-caste orthodoxy. This book for the first time explores what actually happened at Vykom, including its controversial settlement. Correcting misunderstandings, it addresses the rarity of conversion as a mechanism of change, and evaluates shortcomings of Gandhi's leadership.