

REFORM MOVEMENTS

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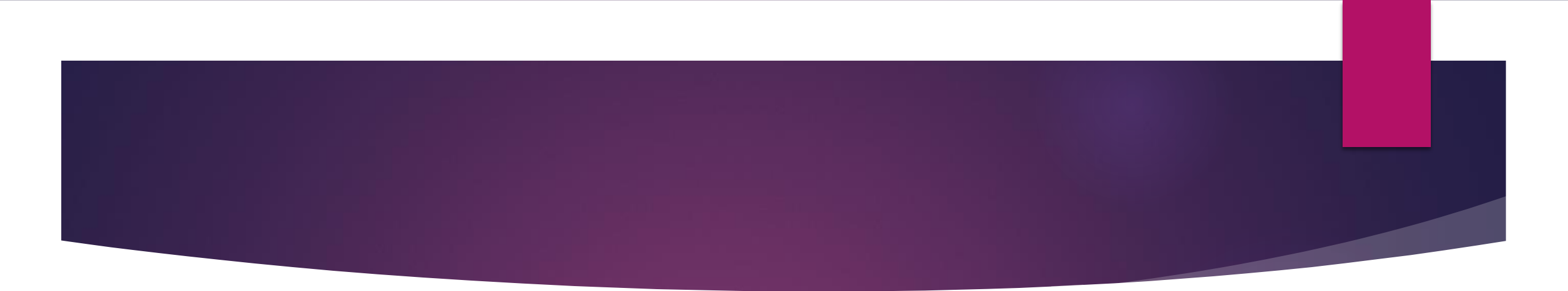
SOCIO-RELIGIOUS REFORM MOVEMENT

From 1812 until almost the close of the century, though political life was characterized by inactivity and society presented an outward calmness, subversive forces were forming and developing.

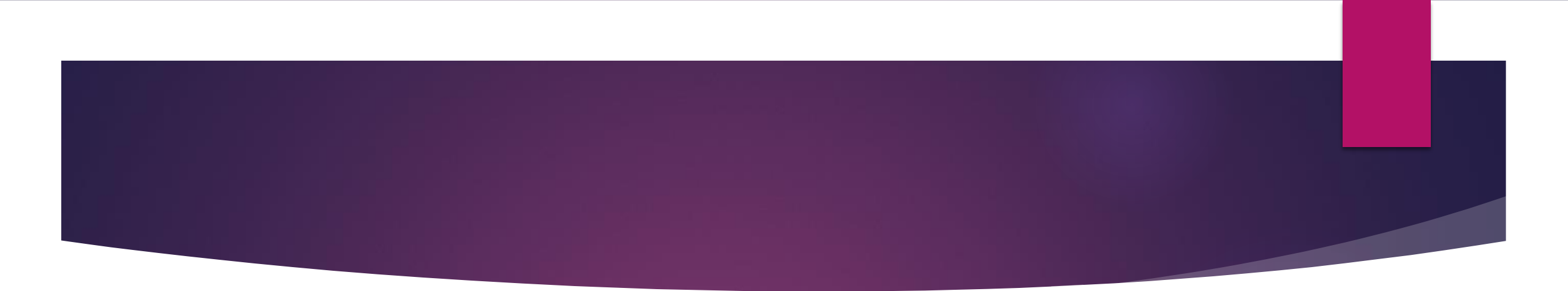
This current of social transformation gradually led Kerala into the mainstream of political struggle for freedom and responsible government in the 20th century.

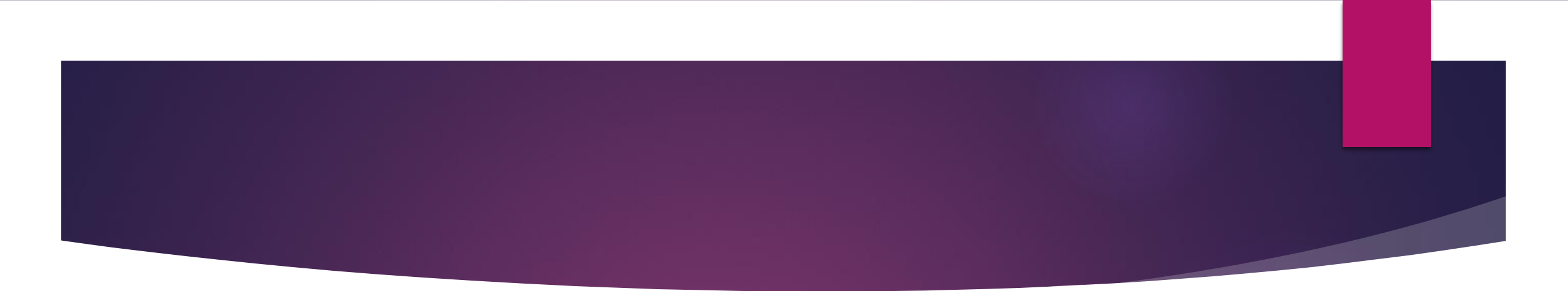
The important outcome of this ferment was the awakening of the masses especially the lower orders in the Hindu society, against social injustice and evils.

This awakening found articulation in Kerala towards the last quarter of the 19th century. A number of socio-religious reform movements, which were also the earliest democratic mass movements in Kerala, took shape.

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- ▶ On the whole, these movements were peaceful and non-violent, though there was an undercurrent of militancy in them. These movements were of the utmost significance, because Kerala had, for centuries, tolerated the caste system in its most oppressive form.
 - ▶ The rigid caste system and irrational caste taboos existed in such a heinous way that the lower orders were not only 'untouchable' but "unapproachable" as well. In Malabar, despite the advent of direct British rule and the resultant separation of the caste system from the administrative machinery, social status and economic competence of the individual was still determined by his position in the caste hierarchy.
 - ▶ In the princely states of Kochi and Travancore, the hold of the caste system was even more suffocating. Until the 20th century, governmental positions were denied to lower castes and non-Hindus.

- ▶ One of the most important social reform movements was spearheaded by Shri Narayana Guru, the great Hindu saint and social reformer. The Guru was born in 1856 in the Ezhava Community which had a status far below that of the Nambudiris.
- ▶ He fearlessly criticized and campaigned against the rigours of the caste system, the Brahmin hegemony and the numerous social disabilities of the Ezhavas and other lower castes. Soon Shri Narayana Guru became the rallying point for the Ezhavas and Thiyyas to unite and organize.
- ▶ The Shri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP), literally the society for the propagation of moral teaching of Shri Narayana came into being on 15th May 1903.
- ▶ Within a short period, the Guru and Yogam drew towards them a brilliant band of dedicated workers, including the poet Kumaran Asan, whose efforts constitute an eloquent testament to what a community, submitted to centuries of tyranny, can do and achieve through unity, realism and organism.

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- ▶ Shri Narayana was, however, no sectarian philosopher and leader. A programme of action founded upon such sublime humanism and social purpose was not destined to remain confined to one caste only; it soon became the philosophy of Hindu reformation, encompassing all castes, including the Brahmin.
 - ▶ The Nairs also felt the need for reform. Throughout the medieval period and until well into the 19th century, the Nairs had a pre-eminent role in Kerala.
 - ▶ By the middle of the 19th century, however, this dominance started waning. Institutions like the sambandam (non-legal marriage) and the matrilineal joint family system, which had ensured the strength of the Nair community earlier, now became productive of many evils.
 - ▶ The impact of the market economy, the disappearance of traditional military training, the absorption of new values through the new system of education, the self-consciousness being generated among the lower castes and their cry for equality and privileges - all these factors brought about a decline of Nair dominance.

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- ▶ The sense of decline gave an impetus to the spirit of reform that expressed itself in the work of religious men like Chattampi Swamikal, in literature, on the press and later in legislative enactments in respect of marriage, inheritance, property rights etc.
 - ▶ Ultimately, the movements crystalized in the foundation of the Nair Service Society in 1914. The impulse to change was not confined to the Ezhavas and other untouchables and the Nairs only. As a matter of fact in varying degrees, it affected every caste in Hindu society as well as the Christians and the Muslims.

VAIKOM SATYAGRAHA

- ▶ A movement had set on foot to demand admission of the certain sections of the people, the so called 'unapproachables' banned from appearing in public roads adjacent to the famous temple at Vaikom. Conservative opposition was trotted out with obstinate determination.
- ▶ The feeding of Brahmins inside the temple was regarded as an important offering to the deity, and uninterrupted custom was pleaded by those who opposed the movement. It was contended that if the 'Avarnas' were allowed to come into the approach roads the temple priests would be polluted and the temple consequently defiled.
- ▶ The forward section resolved to try the methods of 'Satyagraha' and several individuals, a large number of whom being Nayars and other caste Hindus, organised a "Jatha" to lay their grievance before Maharani Sethu Lakshmi Bai, the Regent of Travancore.

Continuation:-

- ▶ A resolution was moved in the Legislative Council demanding the opening of the temple roads to the 'Avarna' Hindus. But it was thrown out by a majority of twenty-two against twenty-one votes. A little after this Mahatma Gandhi visited Vaikom in Meenam 1100(Ch. era-1924), interviewed several orthodox Brahmins and others, and explained the movement as one which was calculated to remove social injustice and to advance the cause of humanity.
- ▶ Public opinion in the state was so favourable that the government threw open the approach roads to the 'Avarnas'. "I call it a bed-rock of freedom", said Mahatma Gandhi, "because the settlement is a document between the people and the state constituting a big step in the direction of liberty in one respect at least". The course of events in Vaikom led to similar attempts in Suchindram and Thiruvvarppu.

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GURUVAYUR SATYAGRAHA

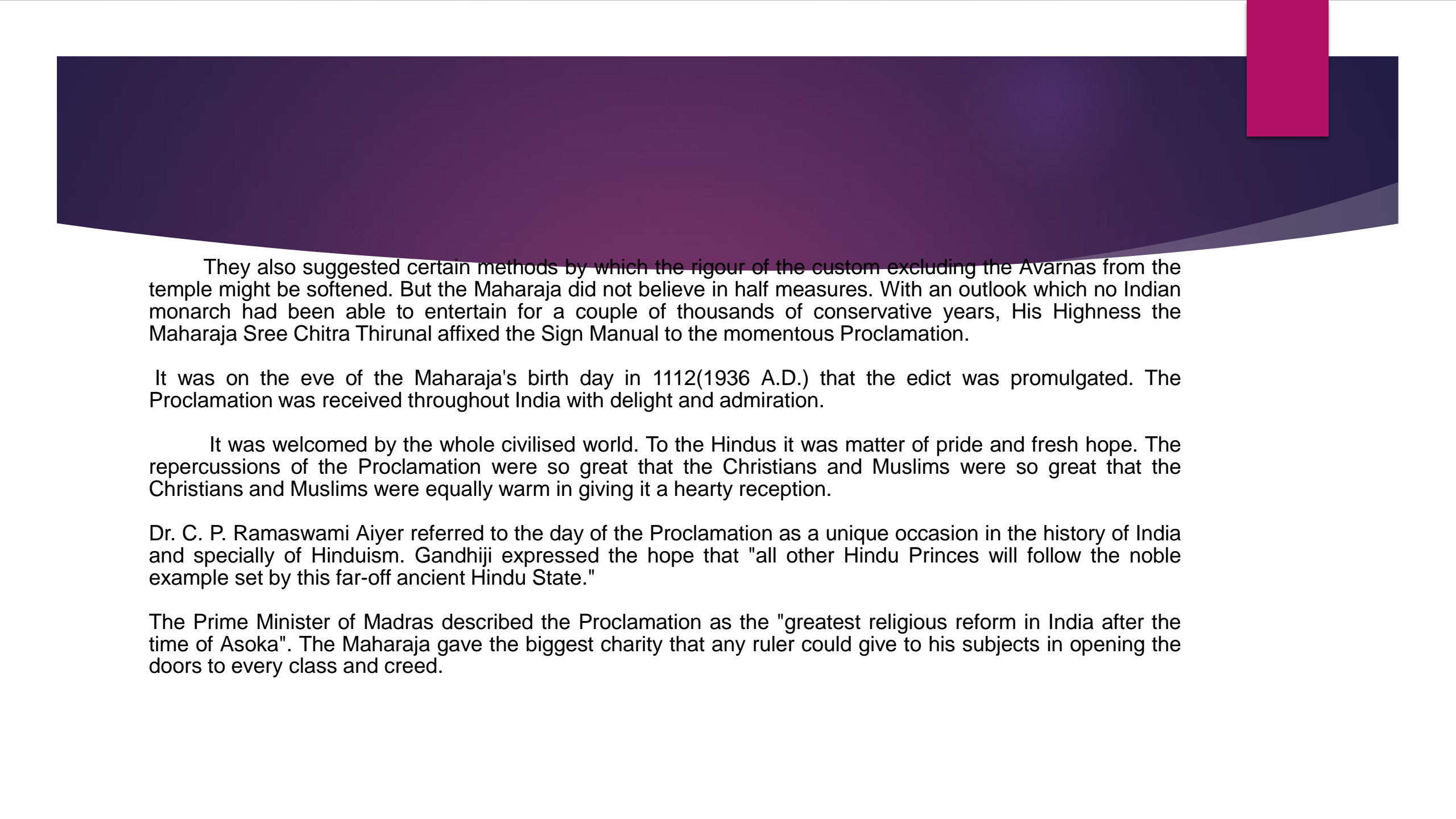
- ▶ The famous Guruvayur Satyagraha is a memorable episode in the history of the national movement. With the blessings of Mahatma Gandhi the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee decided to begin Satyagraha before the famous temple at Guruvayur with effect from 1st November, 1931. It was a movement for temple entry and abolition of untouchability.
- ▶ The Satyagraha began accordingly under the leadership of Sri. K. Kelappan. Among the Kerala leaders other than Kelappan were Mannath Padmanabhan, A.K. Gopalan and N.P. Damodaran. Guruvayur began to attract the attention of all India.
- ▶ There were certain untoward incidents during the early period of the Satyagraha. They served to heighten the tension in the minds of the people who were in sympathy with the movement. After the movement had run its course for about ten months, Kelappan entered on a fast before the temple on September, 21, 1932.
- ▶ The fast electrified the atmosphere. On October 2, 1932 Kelappan broke his fast in response to Gandhiji's wishes. There after a referendum was held among the Hindus to find out their views on the question of temple entry.
- ▶ More than 77 percent of the Hindus expressed themselves in favour of temple entry. The Guruvayur temple was thrown open to Harijans only in 1946. Though the Satyagraha did not immediately result in the opening of the Guruvayur temple to all Hindus, the movement helped to create a strong public opinion in the country in favour of temple entry and abolition of untouchability.

TEMPLE ENTRY PROCLAMATION

► In Travancore the movements for the mitigation of the severities of caste, if not its total abolition, have been popular. The teachings of Sree Narayana Guru gave a momentum to the forces which were generated by the extension of western education among the masses and the tolerant policy pursued by the State in recognising the legitimate claims of the backward communities.

The promulgation of the Temple Entry Proclamation was a reform of far-reaching importance, not only to the teeming millions of Travancore but a momentous act of emancipation and hope to the whole of India. The Proclamation runs as follows: "Profoundly convinced of the truth and validity of our religion, believing that it is based on divine guidance and on all-comprehending toleration, knowing that in its practice it has through out the centuries, adapted itself to the needs of changing times, solicitous that none of our Hindu subjects should, by reason of birth or caste of community, be denied the consolations and the solace of the Hindu faith.

"His Highness the Maharaja had earlier in his reign commanded the appointment of a committee to examine the question of Temple Entry for the 'Avarnas' to find out the extent of the demand for reforms, to ascertain the attitude of the Savarna castes, to examine the question in the light of the Hindu scriptures and formulate proposals as to the lines on which the reform might be effected. The committee expressed their considered opinion that a Parishad of learned persons, well versed in the theory and practice of Hinduism, should be summoned, and that the reform might be effected by the ruler with their approval.



They also suggested certain methods by which the rigour of the custom excluding the Avarnas from the temple might be softened. But the Maharaja did not believe in half measures. With an outlook which no Indian monarch had been able to entertain for a couple of thousands of conservative years, His Highness the Maharaja Sree Chitra Thirunal affixed the Sign Manual to the momentous Proclamation.

It was on the eve of the Maharaja's birth day in 1112(1936 A.D.) that the edict was promulgated. The Proclamation was received throughout India with delight and admiration.

It was welcomed by the whole civilised world. To the Hindus it was matter of pride and fresh hope. The repercussions of the Proclamation were so great that the Christians and Muslims were so great that the Christians and Muslims were equally warm in giving it a hearty reception.

Dr. C. P. Ramaswami Aiyer referred to the day of the Proclamation as a unique occasion in the history of India and specially of Hinduism. Gandhiji expressed the hope that "all other Hindu Princes will follow the noble example set by this far-off ancient Hindu State."

The Prime Minister of Madras described the Proclamation as the "greatest religious reform in India after the time of Asoka". The Maharaja gave the biggest charity that any ruler could give to his subjects in opening the doors to every class and creed.



*Thank
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