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Mahatma Ayyankali at 163: The Man Who Told Landlords Weeds Would Grow in Their Fields

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Mahatma Ayyankali at 163: The Man Who Told Landlords Weeds Would Grow in Their Fields

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✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

August 28, 2026 marks the **163rd birth anniversary of Mahatma Ayyankali**, born on **August 28, 1863** at **Venganoor in Travancore**. The Prime Minister paid tribute. The same day is also observed as **Sree Narayana Guru Jayanti**, on the Chatayam star in the Malayalam month of Chingam, placing two of Kerala's foremost social reformers in a single day's observance.

WHO HE WAS

Ayyankali was born into the **Pulayar** community, then classified as untouchable in Travancore and subject to a comprehensive régime of disability: prohibition from using public roads, from entering markets and schools, from wearing certain clothing, and from approaching caste Hindus within a prescribed distance.

He was **not formally educated**, having been denied schooling by the very system he would later attack at that exact point.

THE SEQUENCE THAT MATTERS

The events are usually listed as separate achievements. They are better understood as **one campaign escalating over fourteen years**, in which each step was taken because the previous one was not enough.

YEAR	STEP	WHY IT FOLLOWED
1893	Villuvandi Yatra	Asserting the right of passage on public roads
1904	Built a school for Dalit children at his own initiative	Government schools were closed to them, so he built an alternative. It was destroyed by upper-caste men.
1907	Founded the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham ; petitioned the government; the Travancore government passed an order permitting Dalit children into public schools	Building a parallel school had failed, so he sought the state's authority instead
1907	Agricultural labourers' strike	The order was passed and then refused implementation by officials and by school managements composed of landlords
1910	The right to education without discrimination was effectively realised	Sustained pressure finally moved the practice, not merely the rule
1912	Nominated to the Sree Moolam Praja Sabha	

1. The Villuvandi Yatra, 1893

Ayyankali bought a **villuvandi**, a bullock cart of the kind used by upper-caste men, dressed in the clothing forbidden to his community, and **drove it along a public road** at Venganoor reserved for caste Hindus. The journey is commonly described as running from Venganoor towards Kavadiyar.

Why this was more than a gesture. The prohibition on road use was not merely humiliating; it was **economically disabling**. A community that could not use the roads could not reach markets, could not sell its labour freely, and could not move. By asserting the right of passage in the most visible possible form, Ayyankali attacked the **infrastructure of caste** rather than its sentiment.

The ride was met with violence and led to clashes. It also established him as a leader and made the road question a public one.

2. The school, built and burned

In **1904**, denied entry to government schools, Ayyankali did not petition first. He **built a school** for Pulaya children himself. It was **destroyed by upper-caste men**.

That failure is what pushed the campaign towards the state, and towards organisation. The **Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham**, the Association for the Protection of the Poor, was founded in **1907** and submitted petitions seeking government orders on school admission.

3. The strike of 1907, and the sentence that carried it

The government **did** pass the order in 1907. **Officials and school managements, composed of landlords, refused to implement it.**

Ayyankali's response is the most analytically sophisticated act of his career. He called on Pulaya agricultural labourers to **stop working the fields**. Because the Pulayar performed the bulk of agrestic labour in Travancore's paddy economy, the withdrawal of that labour halted cultivation.

His challenge to the landlords is remembered in a single line: **"If you don't allow our children to study, weeds will grow in your fields."**

The logic is worth stating precisely. He had identified that his community's **social exclusion coexisted with its economic indispensability**, and he used the second against the first. The strike converted a demand the landlords could ignore into a cost they could not, thereby giving the people who could concede the demand a reason to do so.

The demands were not only about schooling. Calling off the strike required, alongside educational rights for Dalit children, **rest time during working hours** and **payment of wages in cash** rather than in kind. That is a recognisably modern labour charter, in 1907, from a movement usually filed under social reform rather than labour history.

It is widely regarded as **among the first organised agricultural labour strikes in India**, and is often described as Kerala's first workers' strike.

4. Panchami and the Ooruttambalam school

In **1910**, after Dewan **P. Rajagopalachari** and the director of the education department issued orders permitting Dalit admission, Ayyankali took **Panchami**, a Pulaya girl, to the **Ooruttambalam** school near Balaramapuram seeking her admission. The attempt was violently resisted, and the school was burned.

*Sources differ on the Panchami episode: some place the admission attempt and the burning of the school in **1910**, others date the burning to **1915**. The **1910** date for the admission attempt, tied to Dewan Rajagopalachari's order, is the better attested. Treat the year of the burning as contested rather than settled, and do not assert a single date with confidence in an answer.*

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The comparison with Sree Narayana Guru, whose Jayanti falls on the same day, is instructive rather than competitive.

	SREE NARAYANA GURU	AYYANKALI
Community	Ezhava	Pulayar
Primary method	Spiritual and philosophical reform: temple consecration, the message of “one caste, one religion, one God for man”	Direct action: road entry, parallel institution, strike
Organisational vehicle	SNDP Yogam (1903), through Dr Palpu and Kumaran Asan	Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham (1907)
Theory of change	Reform caste society from within, by demonstrating the emptiness of its claims	Impose a cost on caste society until it concedes

Both were necessary, and Kerala’s social transformation is not explicable through either alone. The point for an answer is that **social reform movements differ in method according to the position of the community from which they arise**. The Ezhavas had some economic mobility and could pursue reform through institutions; the Pulayar, at the base of the agrarian order, had **labour** as their principal instrument, and Ayyankali used it.

The strike anticipates a later argument. It treats caste oppression as inseparable from control over land and labour, an argument later central to Dr Ambedkar’s writing and to the Dalit movement generally. Ayyankali arrived at it in practice in 1907, without theory and without formal education.

And the 1907-to-1910 gap is permanently relevant. The order was passed in 1907. The right was realised in 1910. Between them sat three years of refusal by officials and landlords, closed only by sustained pressure from below. **The gap between a notified right and an enjoyed right** is the recurring structure of Indian social legislation, and it did not end in 1910.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 1: Modern Indian history from about the middle of the eighteenth century; the freedom struggle; **social reform movements**; the role of personalities in society and social empowerment.

Prelims angle: Ayyankali’s dates, the Villuvandi Yatra, the SJPS and its year, the 1907 strike, the Sree Moolam Praja Sabha, and the distinction from Sree Narayana Guru and the SNDP Yogam. Kerala social reformers are a recurring Prelims cluster.

Mains angle: “Social reform movements differed in method according to the economic position of the communities that generated them. Examine with reference to Kerala.”

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGE PEDIA

AYYANKALI:

Born 28 August 1863 at Venganoor, Travancore; died 18 June 1941.

Belonged to the Pulayar community; received no formal education.

Villuvandi Yatra, 1893: drove a bullock cart along a road reserved for caste Hindus at Venganoor, wearing clothing forbidden to his community.

1904: built a school for Dalit children himself; it was destroyed by upper-caste men.

Founded the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS), the Association for the Protection of the Poor, in 1907.

1907: agricultural labourers' strike, widely regarded as among the first organised agricultural strikes in India and often called Kerala's first workers' strike. Demands on calling it off included educational rights for Dalit children, rest time during work, and payment of wages in cash.

His challenge to the landlords: "If you don't allow our children to study, weeds will grow in your fields."

The Travancore government passed the school-admission order in 1907; it was refused implementation by officials and landlord-run school managements, and education without discrimination was effectively realised in 1910.

Panchami, a Pulaya girl, was taken by Ayyankali to the Ooruttambalam school near Balaramapuram in 1910, following Dewan P. Rajagopalachari's order. The school was burned; sources differ on whether the burning occurred in 1910 or 1915.

Nominated to the Sree Moolam Praja Sabha, the Travancore legislative assembly, in 1912.

Mahatma Gandhi met him in 1937 at Venganoor.

Commonly titled Mahatma.

KERALA'S SOCIAL REFORM CLUSTER, DISTINGUISHED:

Sree Narayana Guru (1856-1928): Ezhava; Aruvippuram Pratishta, 1888, consecrating a Siva idol as a non-Brahmin; motto "One caste, one religion, one God for man"; inspired the SNDP Yogam (1903), organised by Dr Palpu with Kumaran Asan as its first general secretary. Jayanti falls on Chatayam in Chingam.

Ayyankali (1863-1941): Pulayar; direct action, parallel schooling, labour strike, SJPS.

Vaikom Satyagraha, 1924-25: for the right of avarna castes to use the roads around the Vaikom Mahadeva Temple; leaders included T.K. Madhavan, K.P. Kesava Menon and George Joseph; Gandhi visited in 1925; Periyar E.V. Ramasamy participated and earned the title Vaikom Veerar.

Guruvayur Satyagraha, 1931-32: led by K. Kelappan, with A.K. Gopalan as a volunteer captain.

Temple Entry Proclamation, 12 November 1936, by Maharaja Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma of Travancore, opened state temples to all Hindus.

Channar Lahala (Nadar women's upper-cloth revolt), Travancore, resolved by proclamation in 1859.

Vaikunda Swami (Ayya Vaikundar) and Poikayil Yohannan (Kumara Guru) are the other reformers of the region commonly examined.

WATCH THE TRAP:

The agricultural strike was in 1907, not 1904. 1904 is the year Ayyankali built his own school, which was then destroyed. Many summaries run the two together.

Ayyankali and Sree Narayana Guru were contemporaries from different communities with different methods. They are not interchangeable, and the SNDP Yogam is the Guru's vehicle, not Ayyankali's.

The Vaikom Satyagraha was about roads around a temple, not about entry into the temple itself. Temple entry came with the 1936 Proclamation.

The 1907 government order and the 1910 realisation are different events. The order existed for three years before the right did.

Source: Mahatma Ayyankali at 163: The Man Who Told Landlords Weeds Would Grow in Their Fields —
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