

The Legacy of Kuriakose Elias Chavara as a Social Reformer

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Abstract- The dignity of man, who is endowed with both body and soul, was the basis for all social activities and humanitarian services of Kuriakose Elias Chavara. He gave prime importance to the dignity of a human being from his faith that all are created in the image and likeness of God. The foundation of empowerment of dalits and minorities are education and employment. Chavara was keen to initiate a movement which ensure public education, and thus open possibilities for decent employment. The establishment of a Charity home at the small village of Kainakari in the state of Kerala in India distinctively emphasize the concern of Chavara towards the sick and suffering in society where the uncharitable practices are predominant because of the caste- system and its numerous norms. Chavara's success in all his many undertakings was undoubtedly originated from his spiritual vision. It led him to be an innovator of many socio-pastoral, cultural, educational and social reforms. While he most assiduously lived the life of a Religious, dedicated to the love and service of God, the same divine love in him inspired him to devote himself, as much as he could, to the love and service of men. It is a long and most praiseworthy record, his varied enterprises and activities for the religious, social, cultural and educational advancement of his fellow men.

Index Terms- Chavara, dignity, integral outlook, social reformer

I. INTRODUCTION

Kuriakose Elias Chavara (1805-1871), a renowned social reformer, was a native from the land of Kerala in India. The Catholic Church raised him to the status of a saint on 23rd November 2014 in milieu of his heroic spiritual life and innovative humanitarian services for the uplift of his fellow men. Being a spiritual leader, the major orientation of his life and activities was for the empowerment of people. He firmly believed in the right to maintain the dignity of each and every individual and the upholding of the same became the major priority of his services. The social situations of Kerala during his life time were deplorable due to the existence of a caste- oriented and socially unequal society. People belonging to the higher castes enjoyed many privileges while the lower castes were neglected and oppressed. Government jobs and general education were denied to people of the lower castes. They were not allowed even to walk along public roads. Untouchability and such evil customs were predominant and accepted practices in the society. The government itself set up norms and instructions to set limit for the untouchables to walk along public paths and market

places. Dalit women were not allowed to cover their breast, especially in front of higher caste people whom they compelled to call 'Thampuran' (Lord). The dalits lived on the property of the landlords of higher castes and worked for them as bonded laborers. They would be forced to work, but wages would not be paid. As they were forced to bow to their wishes of their masters, they had no self-respect. Even when abused and raped, their women folk could not raise their voice in protest. Education was the right of a small minority. It is against this backdrop of unjust rules and discrimination that the heroic efforts of Chavara becomes important and relevant.

Chavara worked hard to raise the status of his fellow beings and provide them better chances to progress through innovative initiatives and opening opportunities for everyone to flourish and progress. The words and deeds of Chavara proclaim his great vision for the uplift of the people in the society. Today Kerala is holding the highest literacy rate in India and people are enjoying equal social status and the fruits of development. Chavara dreamed for such a society and become a pioneer to start a movement which is primarily based on his own Syrian Christian community and reached out to every one of the society especially to the lower castes and poor.

A. Objectives of the study

To describe the unique contributions of Kuriakose Elias Chavara as a social reformer in the nineteenth century and to identify the radical steps taken by him for the social reformation.

B. Methodology

It is a descriptive study based on the primary and secondary sources on Kuriakose Elias Chavara. The writings of Chavara compiled and published in four volumes – *Complete Works of Chavara* (CWC), which includes his chronicles, literary works, spiritual writings and letters holds a major role in this study. Besides that various studies based on his life and contributions, books and articles related to the topic were used as secondary sources for this study.

The subsequent section of this paper deals with the integral outlook of Chavara for the uplift of a downtrodden society, radical steps taken by him for making a difference and to promote development in all realms and the impact of such actions of him in the later society.

II. INTEGRAL OUTLOOK

Chavara had an integral outlook regarding the worth of all human beings and gave prime importance to the dignity of man from his belief that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. The dignity of man, who is endowed with both body and soul, was the basis for all social activities and

humanitarian services of Chavara. (Panthlackal, 2004) With this ideology he looked at the intellectual, corporal, social and religious values of the person beyond the limits of caste, color and creed. As a socio-cultural and educational visionary his vision embraced most of the important fields in the society. Chavara was a lover of humankind and firmly believed in the providential love of the Father and in the strength of the fraternity of his fellow human beings. He took a keen interest in uplifting the underprivileged classes, the orphans and the poor. He stood as the champion for the cause of women, the downtrodden, the sick, poor and *dalits* (Maria, 2014). He represented the first glimmerings of the rise of social consciousness in Kerala before the advent of Sreenarayana Guru or Ayyankali. He was also a predecessor of the Gandhian ideology that service to God is through service of humanity (Felix, 2004).

The integral outlook possessed by Chavara which guided him to take relevant measures to ensure social reforms in his time can be read from his sense of duty to help others, the awareness of him about the equal value of all human beings, his strong conviction that learning dignify individuals as well as women deserves a lofty status. He was firmly aware of the need of doing justice in a society which is nourishing the practices of untouchability and unseeability. His vision for the people of the society emerged from his ideology that spirituality and humanitarian services should go hand in hand. He set a new trend where social welfare programs become part of spiritually dedicated life. The following sections explains these aspects of his integral outlook exclusively.

A. Duty to Help Others

Chavara had a strong conviction that his life is not for himself, but for others. His more long life than his ancestors was a clear base for this belief of him. The words written by St. Chavara, in one of the letters to his nephew Fr. Joseph Chavara represents this fact. He wrote: God the almighty granted more time to me than to my predecessors. This was granted to me not so much for me I know, as for the benefit of others (CWC, Vol. IV, V/14, 1982). With this conviction he tried his best to make this long existence as a reward and profit to the society. It gave wings to his actions and gave color and enthusiasm to his visions. This other oriented life of Chavara is the main attribute of him which led to find out new ways and means to the transformation of society.

The compassionate heart of Chavara was always aware of his duty to help others as his fellow humans and he reaffirmed this verity by his selfless service to the lowly and the lost (Ramachandran, 1987). In the latitude of the initiation of the institution of the confraternity of St. Joseph for happy death (1843), he had incorporated in clear terms a programme for visiting and assisting the sick besides helping the poor, for whom he wished to provide clothes, food, care and hospitality. He wanted charity to continue even after death by means of the suffrages for the dead.

The uplift of the poor, the destitute, and the low caste were Chavara's dear causes. He wanted to inculcate in destitute men

and women a healthy awareness of self-worth. Also he wanted them to understand that they were not ostracized from society, but rather, were entitled to be enriched both financially and intellectually. They had to develop self-confidence, sound spirituality and morality (Moozhoor, 1993). Chavara's love for his brethren was expressed not only through spiritual helps but also through material help, especially to the poor, the destitute and the outcasts. He used to say: the day in which you do not do some help to others will not be counted in the days of your life. This he practiced in his life and asked others to do the same. (Kanjiramattathil, 1986).

B. Equal Value of All Human Beings

All human beings partake an equal elementary moral status. They have the same fundamental rights, and the like interests of each person should count equal in designs that regulate social policy. Neither hypothetical racial variances, nor skin color, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, intelligence, nor any other differences among humans negate their fundamental equal worth and dignity. These can't are effectively universally admitted. Chavara bequeathed these policy which holds an equal status to all human beings. The strenuous efforts he has undertaken for the *Harijan* people remains as an untainted proof of this fact. The schools initiated by him were open to members of all communities who sought admission, including *Harijans*.

The society of his time stood for the gradation in social status and stood rigidly to hold the tradition of social inequality. As a reformer and promoter of human dignity he gradually made changes in this pattern of the society through the widely accepted educational reforms and print media. His concerns and efforts for the dalits were indeed a revolutionary act at that time. Christian missions always worked among the *Adivasis*, the aboriginal and among the *Harijans* in a practical implementation of the Christian ethic of service. Few people have exemplified this dimension of Indian Christianity as memorably as father Chavara (Venkataraman, 1986).

C. Learning Dignify Individuals

Chavara was keenly aware that the progress of a community greatly depended on the growth from within and assistance from outside. For achieving the former he launched a process of education at various levels, such as theological education and formation of the clergy, education of the children through schools attached to all parishes. For helping the latter he started the medium of press- apostolate, to accomplish which he had to work very hard. His awakened social conscience would stop nothing short of communicating enlightenment and comprehension to others.

For Chavara teaching and learning is a sacred process which leads to enlightening. He invoked his fellow priests and parents to be aware of this. He said: just as without eye one cannot see the material things in the world, so also without knowledge it will be impossible for us to see and understand the reality of world and the eternity of God. As those who have no eye are called blind, so as too those who have no learning are to be called 'intellectually blind.' Hence it is the responsibility of

priests to teach the faithful and of parents to teach their children (CWC, Vol. IV, IX/2, 1982). As part of his educational, social and cultural reforms, Chavara promoted the starting of schools attached to churches, and provided the depressed and backward sections of the society with the opportunity of studying together with the upper class children, by giving them economic aid such as clothes, books, and noon meals. With this same zeal and vision, he started the publication of prayer books and Christian literature with the help of a wooden printing press, designed in plantain marrow. He gave schools an importance almost equal to that of churches.

D. Women Deserves a Lofty Status

The progress and development of a society largely depend on the status of its women and it was Chavara, the first one among the Christians of India who realized the need of empowering women for the social uplift of the families and for the dedicated service of the Church. It is in this context that Chavara's vision on women becomes novel, revolutionary and far ahead of his times (Panthaplackal, 2004). For him, a religious community for women, was first of all, for self-sanctification, then education for value formation, and thirdly to empower the women for social action. Empowering the women folk in society to renew and strengthen the Church and society was a revolutionary vision of Chavara far ahead of his time.

In the particular social set up of Kerala, women too had a very mere position in society at that time. One of the principal aims of Chavara in founding a religious congregation for women was to uplift the social status of women. The members of the congregation were to give education and training to girls so that future mothers would be enlightened to instruct and guide their children. Chavara's vision on women is lofty. There are those who see him as the pioneer of women's emancipation, as the leader of the women's uplift movement (Kadankavil, 2004). He was an ecclesial visionary who realized the need of empowering women for the social development of the families and for the committed service of the Church. His intention behind the ardent desire to establish a convent for women was nothing but to bring women into the main stream of the society and thus to enable them to be leaders not only in the spiritual sphere but also in the social and cultural arena. This step was a far-reaching decision considering the social situation of his time (Maria, 2014).

E. Spirituality Encompasses Humanism

Chavara has been undoubtedly one of the great spiritual *gurus* that Kerala has ever seen. He was a spiritual man and at the same time he was not devoid of anything human. He knew that God's glory was man's glory too. Therefore he was interested in all human spheres. To be in the state of yoga is what the Christian tradition of spirituality basically means by being prayerful or a contemplative. Hence the advice is 'to be engaged in activities while remaining a contemplative', or be a 'contemplative in action', a *karma-yogi*. This is the ideal that Chavara, true to his rootedness in the Christian and Carmelite traditions of spirituality, realized in his own person (Kochumuttam, 2004). His spiritual vision led him to be an innovator of many socio-pastoral, cultural, educational and social reforms. While he most

conscientiously lived the life of a Religious, dedicated to the love and service of God, the same divine love in him inspired him to devote himself, as much as he could, to the love and service of men. It is a long and most praiseworthy record, his varied enterprises and activities for the religious, social, cultural and educational advancement of his fellow men.

As a man of contemplation he conversed with God as an intimate friend, seeking his presence in the deepest realm of his heart. At the same time he was an altruist – a man for others. Thus he proved that divinity and humanness are two sides of the same coin (Maria, 2014). He believed that the faith he professed should be shared with the less fortunate of his fellowmen, and that the right knowledge of the fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man would be the first step towards developing a self confidence in the poor people. This would eventually lead to lifting them up socially also (Chacko, 1959).

F. Need of Doing Justice

Chavara was always a promoter of justice. Felix (2004) reports that in the family code which he gave to the Parishners of Kainakari, he laid several rules to safeguard the claims of the poor and the needy, for example: "do not allow beggars to leave your house empty-handed; do not fail to give as much as you can, by way of charity; never withhold just wages to the labors or make undue delay in paying them, because that is an offence that cries out to god for justice; do not insult the poor, neither vex them, because if God sees them weeping, He will surely wreak vengeance on you..." (CWC Vol. IV, IX/2, 1982).

In Chavara's time, the dalits were compelled to work. They were not given just wages. This was considered their obligation. Father Chavara objected to this system. He insisted that just wages should be provided. His view that God is with the poor, is similar to *dharidranarayan* concept of Swami Vivekananda. Father Chavara also proclaimed the glory of not possessing anything (Menon, 2005).

II. RADICAL STEPS

The steps taken by Chavara for social development mainly comprised in three areas. Educational reforms, literary contributions and charity works.

A. Educational reforms

Kerala was a protuberant domain on the educational record of the country from ancient times. Historians noted that with the upsurge of the temple to a place of importance in the social and cultural life of the people, educational establishments received distinct consideration as they molded a vital part of the temple complex itself. The practice of running educational institutions as part of the Hindu temple complex was a legacy of Buddhism and Jainism. They served in a way the needs of theological education as far as the Hindus were concerned. The Muslims also had their 'Madrasas' and Arabic colleges and the former attached to the mosques were used to give a course of religious instruction. There were village schools also which functioned for the general education of the non-Brahmins. Fr. Chavara did his primary education in such a village school.

By the beginning of the 19th century the state government of Travancore began to take more interest in the field of education in line with the Protestant missionaries. And both Hindus and Protestants profited much out of this. But the educational condition of the Catholics was abysmal. Chavara realized that the community would even remain subjugated if they did not move with the times and so he decided that the religious congregation should concentrate on educational work. So in 1846 the monastery at Mannanam started a new institution of Sanskrit studies where the seminarians, and students from any caste or religion sat together and studied. As a Catholic institution, it was the first of its kind in the world.

Later in the year 1864, while he was the Vicar General of the Syrians, he took a very bold step, for which the country at large should be grateful to him. He issued a mandate, calling upon all parish churches under his jurisdiction to raise schools attached to each of them. For the poor students he arranged the provision to supply study materials, clothes and mid-day meals, which even the government schools were not providing at that time. If today the people of Kerala are literate to a high degree, it is largely because of the farsighted policy of Fr. Chavara in the establishment of a school for each parish (Panthaplackal, 2004). He was a brilliant scholar in literature well versed in seven languages viz. Malayalam, Tamil, Sanskrit, Latin, Italian, Portuguese and Syriac. Chavara was a great educationist. Till his time, the Church in Malabar had not advanced much in the field of education. It was natural that proficient as he was in several languages he became a powerful influence in the cause of education.

B. Literary enlightening

In 1846 Saint Chavara took essential steps in opening a printing press for the Church in Kerala. At that time there were only two printing presses in Kerala, one owned by Protestant missionaries and another run by the state government. First he approached the Protestant missionaries to get technical help to start a printing press. However, they refused to help. Hence, he somehow got permission to see the press operated by the government at Thiruvananthapuram, took mental note of its details, made a mini sample press with his own hands and asked a carpenter to make a full size press according to his model. The Carpenter was successful in implementing the plan of Saint Chavara. Thus the dream of Saint Chavara to begin a press for Catholics was realized. It was from this press that the first Malayalam daily newspaper, Deepika (Torch-bearer), came out in 1887. He was also the first Indian to start a printing press in the private ownership. This served to publish several books of devotion, prayers, and catholic doctrine. These served to propagate catholic news and literature among the people at large. This has also helped to create many young literary men and women among the Catholics in Kerala.

Amidst his diverse and manifold activities, he found time and leisure to write a few books, both in prose and in verse like *Atmanuthamam* (The lamentations of a repentant Soul- a poem), *Maranaveetil Paduvanulla Pana* (A poem to sing in the bereaved house), *Anasthaciayude Rakthasakshyam* (The martyrdom of Anastacia), historical notes as *Nalagamangal* (Chronicles), *Dhyana Sallapangal* (Colloquies in meditation) and

10 Eclogues (Shepherd Plays) on the birth of Christ. He took initiative in codifying the liturgical books like canonical prayers for priests and prepared the liturgical rubrics, liturgical calendar and office for the dead etc. His counsels to the Christian families given in the form of the "Testament of a Loving Father" is universally applicable and are relevant to this day. As an instruction manual for families its hundred thousands of copies in more than 30 editions were circulated to the Christian families of Kerala.

C. Charity Home

Chavara was very much compassionate towards the poor and marginalized people of the society. In the history of the life of the Church in Kerala, before the time of Chavara, there was no charitable institute as such, where the aged persons or orphans were cared for and protected; there was no pious association to help the dying in a spiritual way. The home for the sick and aged which Fr. Chavara started in 1869 at Kainakari was the first of its kind in Kerala. This was an institution to give refuge to the sick and destitute who had no one to look after them, and to prepare the dying to face a happy death. This was being run by the members of a lay charitable organization 'Confraternity of St. Joseph for happy death'. This was the beginning of the organized humanitarian work of the Kerala Church (Mundaden, 2008). In order to give food and clothing to the poor, Fr. Chavara had also bought few acres of land for financial support near the Mannanam Monastery.

IV. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

This study discloses the following facts regarding the role of St. Chavara as a social reformer in the society of Kerala.

1. His integral outlook towards society prompted him to evoke the awareness in the people to become aware of the duty to help others, accept the equal value of all, the importance of learning, the lofty status of women in the society and the need of doing justice. He also proved that spirituality encompasses humanism and the humanitarian services he had done being a sage give emphasis to this fact.

2. The radical steps taken by him in the educational, literary and charity realms trigger the development in the society especially among the Syrian Catholics.

On the basis of these findings it can justly concluded that St. Chavara was a social reformer who gave significant contributions to awaken the social cognizance of Kerala and become a trend setter to trigger its further progress. From his life, influences, and literary works one can conjecture that the social change he wished to create was one that upheld human dignity that approved human worth and hold everyone in equal respect and deference.

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