

EDUCATIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF SAINT CHAVARA KURIAKOSE ELIAS

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ABSTRACT: Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara (1805-1871), endearingly known as ‘Chavarayachan’, was born on 10th February 1805 at Kainakary in Alapuzha, Kerala. He was a revered priest, a great soul and socio-cultural activist, venerated as a Saint and social reformer who brought humanity into Kerala's brutal social order. At a time when untouchability was so widespread and education was the exclusive birthright of the upper castes, it was practically impossible for the children of the lower castes to get admitted to schools. He sought to bring about the reformation by issuing a decree that schools which provide education to all, regardless of caste or religion, be established beside the Catholic parishes. He is credited with foundations of two Congregations, a Sanskrit School, indigenous printing press, schools adjoined to every Church [Pallikoodam], boarding school attached to convents and women empowerment programmes. He paved the way for personal and societal transformation through the imparting of basic education to all by starting schools and other institutions. By starting a Sanskrit school, Chavara made sure that the marginalized members of society, especially those from the Dalit communities, had access to letters and culture that was considered the sole domain of the higher castes. In this context this paper highlighted the educational contributions of St. Chavara as ‘the Father of Literacy’ in Kerala.

Keywords: Sanskrit School, Pallikkoodam, Indigenous Printing Press, Boarding School

INTRODUCTION

Kerala society in the nineteenth century drowned in multiple social problems. Social stratification of caste system, religious superstitions, inequality in every aspects of Kerala society. Not only for the men of the low caste but also for the woman and children suffered a

lot by the high caste dominators. People belonging to the higher castes enjoyed many privileges while the lower castes were neglected and oppressed. The principles of social freedom and equality found no place in Hindu social organization. The upper castes like the Brahmins, the Ksatriyas, and the Nairs enjoyed several immunities and privileges which were denied over the centuries to the Ezhavas, the Harijans, and the other backward classes. The upper castes constituted the land owning class, and they freely oppressed the members of the other castes considered inferior to them in the social scale. The law administered by them was not equalitarian in any sense. The social evils of untouchability, unapproachability, and unseeability continued to be a disgrace to the Hindu society. The result was the complete segregation of the Hindus of one caste from their brethren belonging to the other castes in the society. The Avarnas or the low castes were denied access to temples, schools, and places of public resort, and there were restrictions even on their freedom to walk without fear along the public road. The practice of pollution was widely observed. It was in this situation, Saint Chavara, with his prophetic and holistic vision, could touch and transform the society, Church and community in a significant manner.

At Mannanam, he started a Sanskrit school in 1846. During that time entry to Government schools was based on caste. Admission was reserved for the upper crust of society. The untouchables were not given admission even in the schools run by the Government. In that context giving education to those people was a revolutionary act. In order to have the realization of this desire he decided to start schools for the Dalits alone. It was really a difficult task to make his colleagues and others convinced of this necessity. Facing all the oppositions he made two schools for them, one at Mannanam and the other at Arppookkara. They were not big schools. The foundations of these sheds were made by the public. The walls were of bamboo sheets and the roof with palm leaves.

St.Chavara took special interest in admitting dalits (those from the lower echelons of to be denied society) into the Catholic schools, contrary to the prevailing norms. He sent messengers to dalit households and encouraged them to send their children to the schools. However, there was a high dropout rate as most of the children were those of poor labourers who wanted their children to help them at work. For Saint Chavara, every problem had a solution. He initiated free midday meals in schools and this brought down the dropout rate. The parishes found funds for the mid-day meals from their meagre resources. The parishes

started offering students both mid-day meals and clothes free of cost, and the fund to finance this scheme came through charity.

He inspired the dalits to send their children to schools, and the students were offered free noon meal and paddy fields, with the co-operation of people, were bought for the same purpose. In fact, understanding the dynamics of the life of the poor from the lower strata of the society, especially the fact that the children, instead of having been given access to education, were absorbed into agricultural labour, Chavara strategically put in place a midday meal scheme for school children. The mid-day meal programme was organized by the pidiyari system. The charity initiative of Pidiyari (handful of rice) was first introduced in Malabar by St. Chavara to fund several schemes. The faithful in every household was asked to keep a special vessel, labelled 'Infant Jesus Treasury' and to place handful of rice in it, three times a day, from the rice measured out for the daily consumption of the family. This quantity of rice kept aside, was collected at fixed intervals and used for charitable purposes as per the instructions of the Vicar Apostolic of Verapoly. This is considered to be a great and revolutionary step in solving the problem of poverty among the poor and the dalits of Kerala. It is to be noted that the state of Travancore tried to implement the mid-day meal system during the rule of C. Keshavan in 1951 and Pattam Thanupillai in 1961. He collected funds from the rich people and bought paddy fields at Mannanam. He intended this to be a sustainable source for payment of salary of the teachers and for midday meals for the children. Through notes, leaflets, sermons, and via the parish priest, he kept urging people to send their children to school. Lack of financial resources or other material impediments at no time stood in the way of St. Chavara and his dreams.

Chavara facilitated the learning of Sanskrit both to priestly candidates and children from various parishes in the school established in Mannanam in 1846. At the time of the establishment of the Sanskrit school, he sent out an instruction to various parishes that two students each should be sent to the school. Although these two groups do not seem to be very huge in terms of the number, it was another innovative and strategic step adopted by Chavara to ensure that the members of the Catholic Church in Kerala had people who were well-versed in Sanskrit, a language in which many of the classic literary compositions of the country were available¹. In the course of time this facilitated the training of many a Christian in Sanskrit, who, in turn, also made significant contributions to the Sanskrit language. Moreover, the learning of Sanskrit language by a few in the Church is to be identified as a

very significant step as it gradually opened up the gates of Indian and Hindu thought to the Christian community. Knowledge of Sanskrit facilitated better understanding of their worldview and greater appreciation of their life patterns. Thus, the recognition of Indian philosophy and its adoption into the seminary curriculum, which may be recognized as an innovative step adopted by the Indian Catholic Church after the Vatican Council II, have their beginning in the praiseworthy vision of Chavara as it is reflected in the starting of Sanskrit school.

The establishment of Sanskrit school testifies Chavara's love for Indian culture and heritage because Sanskrit is the sacred language of the majority religion, namely, Hindu. Sanskrit was the language of the Brahmins, the upper class Hindus of the community during that time. By establishing a Sanskrit school and inviting both the Christians and the lower caste for learning Sanskrit, Chavara broke the barriers established between the upper and lower caste Hindus. He invited them towards a religion of peace and universal harmony. His enthusiasm for learning and teaching Sanskrit which is the language of India's Vedas, the Upanishads and epics. Chavara rightly believed that studying Sanskrit would empower the people to understand and internalize the soul of India. He wanted everyone to benefit from the philosophical insights provided by the epics and Upanishads, thus encouraging a lifestyle imbued with the true cultural ethos of the land. He taught the truth that all human beings, irrespective of caste or economic status, were one. He instilled in us the message that the eradication of social evils and inequities is the will of God. Considering these children as the children of God, and understanding their prerogative for education, Chavara strenuously struggled for their uplift. One of the most rewarding initiatives that he had put in place was keeping the schools accessible to all sections of the society. This was a revolutionary step towards the elimination of not only poverty, but also untouchability and discrimination.

A revolutionary innovation attributed to Chavara is the setting up of the schools attached to each parish of the Malabar Church. Of course, it was the Vicar Apostolic of Verapoly Bernardine Baccinelli, who published a common circular for all the parishes to start schools attached to churches. But it is widely agreed that the Vicar General of the Thomas Christians Father Chavara was the brain behind the circular. The circular written in the hand of Chavara is kept in the Archives of the Mannanam monastery, and is an evidence for Chavara's commitment for the learning of the common people. By the circular, education became very popular not only for the upper class people but even the poor and the *dalit* of the community.

The Chronicle of the monastery (1864-71) has the following entry:

“When Fr Prior was here [Mannanam] we received the archbishop's decree, which demanded that in every parish a school be established for the education of children. It warned that those who neglected to comply with this order would incur censure. Mannanam monastery immediately started the construction of a school. We also decided to establish a chapel with a school attached for the pulaya converts.”

His efforts were at transforming churches as repositories of knowledge and a transactional platform for inclusive literacy. In order to bring the advantages of education for many, as Vicar General of the Syro-Malabar Catholics, St Chavara had issued a decree that all the Churches should start a school or else Churches will be closed. In his capacity as the Vicar General of the Diocese of Verapoly (Kerala), in 1865, Chavara was instrumental in issuing an innovative and epoch-making directive to all Catholic parishes, by the then Archbishop Barnadenos, to start schools attached to every church. It is from this order and the subsequent practice that the very word "Pallikudam" - having a school attached to the church - has probably evolved.

The call for 'a school for every church' had far reaching effects whereby in the coming years and decades many Churches started educational institutions and due to the proximity to the schools, more and more families began to send their children to schools. This was a slow revolution that brought Kerala to the level of reaching the best literacy rate among all the states in India. If the State of Kerala has such a glorious achievement in the field of formal education, the contribution of the Catholic Church, which was moved into the field of education by Chavara, is very significant. Thus he rightly been called the ‘Father of Literacy in Kerala’.

St.Chavara also wrote about the importance of education in the life of an individual and the necessity of due care in monitoring the progress as follows: "When children reach the age of discretion, they should be sent to school. Besides, the parents should enquire about their studies and their friendships. On Sundays, what they had studied during the previous week is to be examined."

It is considered that the day when St Chavara gave admission in the new school in 1846 to the dalits and the lower sections of the society he also commenced the civil society in Kerala. His

call for the just wages and timely distribution of wages to the dalits and daily workers had its great effect on the society which understood its responsibility to give justice to all sections of the society. In this regard he can be called as the first liberator of the dalits in Kerala. Admitting dalit children in schools and opening of a Sanskrit school at Mannanam were also important steps that deserve special mention. These steps had great impact in the reformation of not only the Christian community but also Kerala society as a whole. We should not forget that the renaissance that took place in Kerala society owes a lot to the efforts of great souls like Chavara. This pious soul's contribution stands out against the social conditions that prevailed at that time. At a time when the dalits were denied school education and the use of public roads, he dared to admit such students to the school he opened.

Chavara's concept of universal schooling took time to be accepted by the whole society; nevertheless, he championed a movement in the direction. Slowly universal education turned the marginalized classes of society into participants of various projects with access to authority and wealth and, thus, the society was transformed. One timely small action taken by Chavara at an appropriate time created ripples along the way. Education created a strong middle class in Kerala which, in turn, strengthened the society through decentralization of wealth; this also fortified the democratic institutions. The missionary congregations he started continue to radiate the positive energy and are carrying on his legacy venturing new models to uplift society.

Another attempt of Chavara in view of the common good of the people was the setting up of the printing press at Mannanam for publishing spiritual as well as secular books. As a writer, organizer, social reformer and, above all, a spiritual guide, Saint Chavara realized the significance of media and thought ahead of time to utilize it in the best possible ways. He turned his attention to the print media which was the only main mass communication facility of the time. The tradition of modern printing in Kerala was started by European evangelists such as Benjamin Bailey (CMS Press, Kottayam, 1821) and Hermann Gundert (Mission Press, Thalassery, 1845). Indigenization was achieved by the Maharaja of Travancore, Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma (Government Press, Thiruvananthapuram, 1836). It is unlikely that Maharaja Swathi Thirunal would have faced any material or personal hardships in launching a printing press.

In the history of vernacular printing, over and above the foreign evangelists and government machinery, there is an individual-centred stream. It is the saga of a print revolution organized by one man all alone - a printing heritage with an imprint of scarcity that led Kerala to modernity with the development and acquisition of technical knowhow even in the face of severe hardship and shortage of funds. Thus was begun Kerala's tradition in printing. Its origin was from Kuriakose Elias Chavara or Chavarayachan.

In 1846 St.Chavara took essential steps in opening a printing press for the Church in Kerala. During that time there were only two printing presses in Kerala, one owned by the State Government and the other one by Protestant Missionaries. Chavara approached the protestant missionaries to get technical help to start a printing press, but they refused to help him. The printing technology was unknown to Chavara. The printing machine and associated equipments were not manufactured in India at this time. The indigenization of technology, revamping available technology to suit Malayalam language etc were straggling task of the time. Chavara got permission to see the press run by the Government at Thiruvananthapuram. It was a turning point for starting a printing press .Chavara along with Muttuchira Parambil Kathanar went to Government press, with the help of the catholic employees there Chavara learnt the operation of the printing machine. He returned with Paulose, an expert in technology and handicrafts, and etched a model of the machine on plantain pith (vazhathada). Based on the model, a carpenter carved out a wooden printing machine. Thus in 1846 the dream of Chavara to begin a press for Catholics was realized, in the name of St.Joseph Press at Mannanam.

A number of Malayalam and Tamil books unprecedented act of courage came out of this and determination. Establishment of the press promoted the spiritual and intellectual climate of Kerala at a critical time in history. The hard work of Chavara and his associates culminated in St Joseph's Press publishing its first book, *Jnana Piyusham* in 1846. It was a translation of a Tamil Christian prayer book. 18 x 12 cms in size and running into 332 pages. An article that appeared in the Nasrani Deepika issue of April 10, 1896 in connection with the silver jubilee of the printing press says, "The printed book *Jnana Piyusham* was a prayer book. This is the first prayer book made available to Christians in Kerala in their mother tongue. In those days, there was no options for getting paper from Europe and it was not available locally either, so they pasted together two sheets of normal writing paper and printed on it". On April 15, 1887,

the same printing machine was used to print the first edition of the oldest Malayalam daily, the Deepika (earlier called Nasrani Deepika).

At a time when women's presence was unknown in Christian spirituality in Kerala, Chavara gave shape to the first religious order for women in India, the Congregation of Mother Carmel (CMC) at Koonammavu in 1866. This was aimed at the emancipation of women and the wholesome development of society. He popularized the concept of vocational training among the women, thereby making them self-reliant. The early activities of the religious sisters of the first indigenous congregation for women in Kerala included rendering of education and social service to the women of the locality, teaching of handicrafts like embroidery, rosary making etc. By founding this congregation he thought of equipping ladies in basic education, handicrafts, value based life etc. With this purpose the first boarding house for girls was opened at Koonammavu in 1868. The house aimed at the spiritual as well as intellectual development of the girls to be holy and educated members of the society. Many girls from different parts of Kerala were admitted there. They were taught languages, handicraft, cooking, music mathematics, catechism etc.

Highlighting the multifaceted life of Saint Kuriakose Chavara, in 1959, the then Archbishop of Changanacherry, the Servant of God Mar Mathew Kavukatt wrote: Father Kuriakose Elias Chavara was a great Christian, a very holy monk and a successful founder and builder of many institutions. While he most scrupulously 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 of his varied enterprises and activities for the religious, social, cultural and educational advancement of his fellowmen.

CONCLUSION

The educational contributions of St.Chavara for the uplift of the Kerala society is admirable and praiseworthy. He also spearheaded a series of programmes to uplift the ordinary and marginalized people in his capacities as the Prior of the monasteries and the Vicar General of the Marthoma Christians in the Vicariate of Varapuzha during the nineteenth century. Along with many accomplishments of great pioneering merit, St.Chavara is also credited, first, with realizing and acknowledging the genius of the women faithful and, later, with developing programmes as well as the required infrastructure to support the blossoming of their feminine

genius in such a way that not only the Christian community, but the entire society benefited out of their life of consecration and innovative and creative ministries. His mission had a blend of spirituality and modernity. By bringing about the progress of the Church to parish-schools and to printing house and literature, he became one of the catalysts of the social transformation of Kerala in the nineteenth century. Today Kerala is well known for literacy, women empowerment, mass media, social development and spiritual movements only because of the endless efforts by a single person of great wisdom and knowledge.

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