

# Re-visiting St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara - a forgotten Social reformer of 19th century Kerala

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**Abstract :** This paper discusses the role of St Chavara as a social reformer of Kerala and his various contributions for the transformation of the society, especially in the field of education. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Kerala society has undergone major transformations by various socio- religious reforms. In spite of the various contributions of St Chavara in the reformation of the society he is not widely recognized as a social reformer. The research is an attempt to understand the various reasons behind this predicament. The books *Lead kindly Light- A voyage into the saintly life and vision of St. Chavara*, by K.C Chacko, and *Life and Legacy of St. Chavara* edited by John Mannarathara are the primary texts. The research analyses the reasons why he was denied in history. The lack of proper historical archiving is the major reason behind this problem. The services of Christian leaders were most of the time received with a ‘taken for granted’ mentality from the belief that they are dedicated for the service of the society. This research paper also provides a platform for further discussions on why St. Chavara was not considered as social reformer.

**Key words:** St Chavara, Social reformation, Kerala society, education, caste system.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

From the beginning of the human history, society played an inevitable role to form civilizations, way of life, traditions and social identities. History is developed from the contributions of the past. The representation and archiving of history has plentiful biased opinions of the individuals who hold power. In the case of Kerala history also it seemed that, historians were not keen to mention the name of St Chavara as a socio-religious reformer. There are many reasons behind this. In this context, this research intends to find out them.

St Chavara (1805- 1872) was the first native religious priest from the Syrian Christians of India, who was born in 1805, February 10 in Kainakari, Kerala. He had a clear vision; education can ameliorate the society by enlightening the minds of people and lead them to the light of knowledge, so that the darkness of social evils such as untouchability and segregation on the basis of caste system was cleared. He started schools in Sanskrit and Malayalam in Kerala for free education of children irrespective of their caste, religion, gender or financial status. In the background of colonialism, an initiative of a Christian priest to start a Sanskrit school (in 1846) for lower caste and others is a challenge and was a true symbol of his reformative mind. St Chavara also initiated the establishment of two indigenous religious congregations Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI) in 1831 and Congregation of Mother of Carmel (CMC) in 1866, a printing press and a publishing house at Mannanam in 1845, started first boarding school and orphanage in Kerala in 1868, founded a lay organization with the name of St Joseph for the preparation of death for poor people in 1869, founded a Charity home named Upavishala for the sick, old and destitute in our society in 1869 .He became author of the first Malayalam narrative poem ‘ Anastyasyayude Rakthsakshyam’ in 1862 also. He was a facile writer, both in prose and verse. The diary he kept in his own handwriting for over a period of forty one years from 1829-1870 is an authoritative historical record of the church in Malabar (Chacko 62). He also founded special movements for the upliftment of the women and children and other open-handed actions.

He was a strong social prophet of that time. It is quiet shocking to comprehend that all renowned reformers of Kerala were born after 1850 where Chavara’s reformation was in full swing. Moreover, none of them initiated new and independent social reform action which was not initiated by St Chavara. But St Chavara and his contributions are in oblivion in the recorded social and political history of Kerala. Chavara was not widely accepted as a social reformer, but only a saintly religious person. The exclusion of a very dynamic and creative contributor and initiator of social reformation activities is discussed

little till the date and not sought its causes. This setting necessitates the need of the study to locate St. Chavara a Social Reformer or a Catalyst of Social Reformation.

## 2. Methodology:

The research paper attempts to find out the reasons for the non-acceptance of St Chavara as a social reformer of Kerala. This study tries to point out the various contributions of St. Chavara, especially in education sector and its

impacts even today. The research moves further by asking the questions like what are the contributions of St. Chavara that effected measurable changes in the society, how do the contributions of Chavara surpass the activities of known social reformers of nineteenth century in Kerala, why the historians of Kerala overlooked St Chavara's contributions to consider him as a social reformer like the other social reformers of Kerala in the nineteenth century and so on.

Radhakrishnan's idea of St Chavara's education vision and Narayanan's idea of social reformation provides the framework of this research. No one says why St Chavara is not considered as a social reformer. While analysing all these articles, the picture evolved is that of St Chavara as a social reformer. But none of these articles say why he is not considering a social reformer from a secular perspective.

The research use Maslow's personality theory for analysing the personality and reformatory actions of St Chavara and Marxian frame work for sociological perspective. In micro level, the social mobility theory of Kinsley David is also considered. This theory states that there are chances for upward and downward social mobility. This social theory framework will be more applicable in the research in terms of understanding how social mobility of Kerala society was stirred by caste system and transformed by the progressive measures like education. Traditional Hindu culture places a high value on the seclusion of women, knowledge of the sacred lore, celibacy of widows, and purity of diet. It follows by any group which is able to improve its performance in conforming to these standards, such as a caste or even a family, will also improves its social status whether within the same caste or across castes (Davis 382) . The research attempts only to know why St Chavara is not considered a social reformer in the history of Kerala irrespective of his contributions in this realm.

19<sup>th</sup> century was significant in history because of the great awakening. Indian society was drowned in multiple social problems. Social stratification of caste system has been prevalent in Indian society since times immemorial. Religious superstitions influenced people and the impacts of caste system lead to social inequality. Women, children, and people belonging to lower caste and out caste were included in the marginalized sector of society in 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this context, many socio-religious movements came up with the idea of need for equality. Emergence of Middle class and western educational intellectuals contribute for social reformation through renaissance, re-formation and enlightenment. Originally social reformation was done at religious level, but later on adopted a secular approach.

### 3. Discussion:

19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala also witnessed many changes. One of the major problems they faced was the inequalities in caste system. The impact of colonization brought some changes through education. The encounter of Christian missionaries was one of the significant events in the history of Kerala. The missionaries of LMS (London Mission Service) and CMS (Church Mission Service Society) came to Travancore during this period and creatively engaged in conscientising the lower castes to uphold their human rights. At Kottayam the CMS missionaries started the first college in 1817, where students from all castes were given admission and thus altered the monopoly of the higher castes the exclusive privilege of higher education. The Basel mission was working in Malabar where caste structure was less strong, was more liberal in admitting students from lower castes in their educational institutions (Kawashima 167).

Rather than following the pattern of mere missionary work, St Chavara was a catholic religious priest who paved a unique way to make great impact in the society such as the public education movements, women empowerment strategies, and so on. He established his education vision, and it is still producing its fruits even after many decades. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century scenario, Syrian Catholics also had the privilege of upper caste people. The first Malayalam novel-Pulleli kunju by arch Deacon Koshi mentioned what kinds of privileges they had in that time. It is important to understand the importance of a Syrian priest, who did his service for the upliftment of society to eradicate social inequalities.

St Chavara was a man of great vision. Since his childhood, he was brought up in an ideal Christian family. The influence of good family atmosphere and value education had helped to form an integrate personality. From psychological personality theoretical point of view, family remains a corner stone of our understanding of personality development and social relations. Family is the first platform for socialisation. From childhood through adulthood, all family members influence one another. In the past decade, investigators increasingly have embraced a systems view of family socialization processes in which the family is seen to consist of multiple interlocking relationships (Briskly, Rovine 1989) the family is treated as a social system in which the full range of subsystems including parent, child, material, and sibling systems are recognised (Gian 219) .The writings of St Chavara also reflect how his mother and his family influenced him to become an integrated man. His primary education was from a *Kalari*(education system practised in Kerala in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century).Today, when we look back into his life, is clear that, St Chavara's personality is formed from solid foundation from a good family back ground which had rooted in Christian values.

Christianity is deeply rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ. In front of God everybody is same irrespective of caste, colour, social status, and gender. It is from the understanding of God the creator is the father of all creations

and there for every human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27). This is the base of human dignity in Christianity. The idea of equality is the back bone of Christian morality and ethics. Jesus Christ came to this world to bring peace and the good news of internal liberation and salvation. A true follower of Jesus or a true Christian is obliged to follow the foot step of Jesus by practising this Gospel values. They are equality, human dignity, faith in God, compassion, mercy, love and so on. According to the psychological theory of value by Schwartz, at an individual level, values concern the criteria, or standards, that people use to evaluate the actions of them and others (Schwartz 1992). Social values reflect the history of a society, and different societies can be characterised by their prominent, unique values. Societies maintain social orders partly by reproducing, from generation to generation, societal values in the minds of individuals (Rolston 282). According to these psychological frame works, value oriented life of St Chavara had a crucial role in the formation of a moralist society in his time.

St. Chavara, an exemplary follower of Jesus Christ, was a man of prayer and action. He had tried to bring quality in the society. His approach towards humanity is significant in Kerala society in the scenario of inequalities and discriminations based on caste, status and gender. He considered God as his father and other human beings are his brethren. This provides universality to his thoughts and was the vision for a new saga. He had an inclusive spirituality and special concern for the upliftment of poor and backward members of society. In his own words it is described as his 'Abha experience' (seeing God as his father and he as is his son). The idea of equality and compassion for marginalized and towards peripheries worked in his mind as a catalyst for his actions.

#### 4. Analysis:

According to Maslow's personality theory, self actualization is the greatest stage in an individual's life. The motive of self actualisation (Maslow 1954) is related to effectance motivation and intrinsic motivation. Self-Actualisation refers to an individual's need to develop his or her potentialities (Morgan 298). Self –actualisation is in top of the hierarchy of needs in human beings. St. Chavara was a man who came out of his egos and spent his life time fully for the goodness and liberation of others. According to Maslow's personality theory, St Chavara's life also reflects features of self- Actualisation. Self- Actualised people will show the following characteristics: 1) They are realistically oriented, 2) They accept themselves, 3) they have a great deal of spontaneity, 4) They are problem centered rather than self catered, 5) they have profound spiritual experiences(Calvin 454). St. Chavara was other centred rather than self centred. He dedicated his entire life for humanity through his religious life. He also possessed great deal of spontaneity. His service for society, his contributions, and educational vision is the true reflection of his spontaneity and responsibility towards his society. K C chacko explained it in his book *Lead kindly light* like this:

One of the clearest expressions of love and fellow feeling is the desire to share one's knowledge or possession with those whom one loves (Chacko 61).

His inclusive spirituality inspired him for his reformer actions. Inclusive spirituality includes both the centre and peripheries. His spiritual life helped him to come out of himself and see the various needs of his fellowmen in the society and dedicate himself for the uplift of them. St Chavara lived in a society where people remained in a cocoon being the victims and torturers, no one ready to come out of it and think differently. There he opened opportunities for the suppressed and marginalised to educate church schools along with other socially elevated people and to receive enlightenment and progress in their lives. He focused on education, media, literature and social apostolate. Though not a typical social worker, St Chavara served the society with a profound vision. Gandhi, Swami Vivekanda, Tagore and all other great personalities who mobilized the society through their specific vision always had a spirituality of inclusiveness, which they practiced in various arenas. St Chavara, being a catholic religious priest had practiced his inclusive spirituality within his community and in his society.

K C chacko in his book, '*Lead Kindly Light-A voyage into the saintly life and vision of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*' stated that, a good number of educational and philanthropic institutions are adjuncts to houses of the religious and convents. They are scattered about the length and breadth of the country (Chacko 6). This is one of the education visions of St Chavara. Chavara wanted the integral education and consequent upliftment of the society in spiritual, social and in educational levels. He himself was an educated man according to the then prevailing standards. Though he had only elementary school education in the traditional manner, he obtained good theological education and spiritual formation under one of the most reputed Malpans of his times(Chacko 61). It shows that he was a sophisticated and educated man. His vision was undoubtedly unique because it emerged from knowledge and wisdom. K C Chacko, in his book stated that;

The best means of making one's life useful and thus fulfilling one's mission by educating oneself. Father Kuriakose tried to gain his full quota of knowledge. He learnt quite a good deal of Malayalam, Tamil and Sanskrit. The great difficulties he encountered in learning Latin and incidentally Portuguese also. Syriac, the language for liturgy was also his special field of study. He gained some proficiency in Italian also towards the end of his life. Thus one sees a versatile linguist in him (Chacko 61).

The integral knowledge and enlightenment he acquired through education helped him to fix focus on social

reformation through education, which other social reformers lack in their reforming actions. He deserves admiration, in spite of the educational efforts by the state government and by Protestant missionaries in 19th century. That's why he is rightly called a Prophet of our times by historians and scholars like Mundadan and Panthaplakal (Mollykutty 70). The need of education and the proper distribution of opportunities for this was really a challenging task at his time. By starting of a Sanskrit school at Mannanam in 1846, he accomplished this vision for emancipating the society from inequalities and to understand dignity of human life.

K.C chacko in his book stated that, As the Vicar General of the Syrians he took a bold step, for which the country at large should be grateful to him. He had issued a mandate, calling upon all parish churches under his jurisdiction to start schools attached to each one of them. He even threatened to close down the churches that failed to comply with his orders (Chacko 63). St. Chavara uplifted the society through the opening of a platform for education. As a social institution, education has the power to create social mobility. He tried providing a platform for everybody irrespective of the caste and class barrier.

Even though, St Chavara's contributions to strengthen the educational sector made a social mobility in kerala society of 19<sup>th</sup> century, his name was never appeared anywhere as a social reformer of education. His works largely bracketed for Christian community rather than it for a large audience and generally categorised as Christian missionary work.

From Marxian understandings, the infra structure of any society is economy. Social institutions have congruent role to work as a super structure of society. Social institution has the power to control the society. St Chavara considered education as a weapon to control social evils like caste base inequalities. By giving a platform for free education, St Chavara paved a new path for social mobility. Education will lead to civil services in Government. The availability to get job opportunities will open by education. It will remove the false consciousness of the society. The social mobility of people from lower class to higher class can do by educating them. As a social reformer Chavara also did the same. With this intension he started his first attempt in education sector in 1846 at Mannanam. K C Chacko in his book Lead kindly Light explained about this as follows:

As Vicar General of the Syrians he took a very bold step, for which country at large should be grateful to him. (.....)The Syrian Catholics, who were thus guided and led by him, have now to their credit to several collages, High Schools, Middle Schools, Elementary Schools, Industrial Schools, a Sanskrit Collage and a Commercial School. The first English High Schools of Syrian Catholics was founded in 1885 at Mannanam and it is now enjoyed a very enviable reputation (Chacko 64).

St Chavara considered all human beings as his own fellow beings. The historical evidences of St Chavara's contribution towards educational development and its overall impacts never caught up the attention of any historians of Kerala for a long time. Because of this reason he was abandoned to some extent as a social reformer of Kerala 19<sup>th</sup> century. The available documentation of history has not considered his name in the list of social reformers, because of the assumption that St Chavara was a religious priest and he did his services only for the reformation of Syro Malabar Christian community. Prof. Sreedharamenon is one of the famous historians on Kerala history. From his studies also did not find any mentioning about St Chavara in history of 19th century Kerala. There could be many reasons why he was not considered as a social reformer from a secular point of view.

One of the reasons behind this exclusion was he was not belonging to any lower caste but was defending for the welfare of the marginalised around him. When we consider the well-known reform actions of Kerala, most of them were initiated from the oppressed class or lower caste itself. St Chavara's voice for the upliftment of lower castes did not get much acceptance. This can be compared equally with the voice of Gandhi on Dalit issues. The positive contributions of Mahatma Gandhi and other social reformers to the cause of untouchables are over looked and sometimes even denied (Sardesai 41). This was happened in the case of St Chavara also. The voice of Ambedkar on the same discourse widely gets accepted. In the case of St. Chavara, we can see this difference in the way people understood and considered him as a social reformer only for Christians rather than for the society as a whole, because he was not included in the caste inequalities.

The other matters received the special attention Fr. Kuriakose were uplift of the backward classes and catechism. He opened two schools exclusively for the Christian converts from the depressed classes, at Mannanam and Arrpookara. Consider the significance of this movement at the distant age when these depressed classed were grossly neglected (Chacko 72).

Even though he never experienced the traumatic life under social inequalities, he was bothered about the 'other' and his inclusive spirituality include everyone under his social services. His actions to reform a society from lower castes themselves were considered as a reform movement than, that is from an outside community.

There are different dimensions for social reformation. St Chavara's social reforming works did not include any violence or protest, but he used the way which was right according to the Christian values. He was a revolutionary of human minds, innovative ideas, sustainable and practical thoughts. Like Kabir, by being a God's presence and a mentor

for humanity he did social reformation through his Bhakthi tradition. St Chavara also played a very significant role in 19th century Kerala. It was before any other social reformers started their works in the lands of Kerala. The progressive and developmental impacts of St Chavara's actions are still significant. For sustainable and faithful caretaking of his interventions, he initiated two indigenous congregations; CMI and CMC. They contributed much to the education sector of Kerala in the later periods and still continue in the same realm. As per the statistics of 2012, 1988 sisters are engaged in educational apostolate in CMC, imparting education to a total of 203,892 students through various institutions (Kripa 120). As per the statistics of the education apostolate, CMI congregation is also giving a remarkable account for the service in the field of education as follows:

In 1885, the first English school of the Syro Malabar community was started at Mannanam. One of the three poly technique schools sanctioned in the private sector by the Government in 1956 was the Carmel Poly technique started by CMI congregation at Punnapra in Alleppey. It was the English Medium Schools opened by the CMIs that paved the way for greater employment opportunities outside Kerala and abroad. The English Medium School in the private sector was thus, started at Kalamassery. Similarly the first Arts and Science College at Thevara in 1944, Nursing School at Amala in Trissur, Engineering College at Kakkanadu, B Ed College at Mannanam, Medical College at Trissur, and the Deemed University in Bangalore have been forerunners in the field of professional education given by the CMIs (Panthaplakal 103).

P K Michel Tharakan in his documentation on Socio-Economic Factors in Educational Development, Case of 19<sup>th</sup> century Travancore, he stated as following:

'From the 1880s onwards, Catholics started establishing schools. Once they entered the field- strong as they were in terms of numbers as well as wealth- they made spectacular progress. Between 1882 and 1887 the number of schools under Catholic Management increased from around 10 to over 1,000 (Nair 404).

This is one of the articles, which implicitly talks about contributions of St Chavara in education realm. St Chavara starts the first school in 1846, according to the statistics had been given there were a huge progress in education sector. This reformation was done and initiated by St Chavara and it is continuing through his sons and daughters (CMI and CMC) today.

While considering the colonial aspects, British rulers hesitated to promote Sanskrit education. Macaulay's minutes, his propaganda on English education in India and its importance directly criticised Sanskrit and Arabic education in India. In this context, being a native person, St Chavara began a Sanskrit school. It can be considered as one of the most significant and unique contribution of St Chavara. It was a period that the learning of Sanskrit only reserved for upper class community, as Sanskrit is considered as a holy language. Still he wanted everyone to nourish from the richness of this Vedic language. There were no other social reformers in Kerala other than Chavara who took initiative to start such a school for the benefit of everyone in the society. K.S Radhakrishnan dwells on the pivotal role Chavara played in transforming 19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala society from a chaotic crowd to the beginning of a civil society that co-existed in harmony.

Chavara's concern for the poor is clearly expressed in the testament he wrote to his people of Kainakari parish in February 1856 (Complete works of Chavara IV 102). This letter became famous as the Loving father's Death wish. The new awakening first initiated by the Portuguese, was taken over by missionaries who arrived with the European powers. One such reformer of Kerala was Chavara. The article by Dr. M.G.S Narayanan, "Precursor of reformist movements" points out how St Chavara initially prepared a ground for future reformers like Sree Narayana Guru, Chattambi Swamikal and others. The role of St Chavara to create the modernity is unforgettable. The article by P.K Rajashekar, "Vazhathada (banana trunk) Revolution; Chavara and Indigenous Printing Technology" traces the efforts of St Chavara to bring about modernity to Kerala and how he won a tough battle against the retrogressive social ideology that society was entrenched in.

Even though Kerala history largely forgot him, there are few archiving of his reformation actions had happened from his followers. There are mentioning about St Chavara's contributions towards education and reformation by P K Michel Tharakan,

## 5. Result:

Fr Kuriakose Elias Chavara, another rare Syrian vicar general in a missionary dominated church had also started a school in Mannanam, besides calling upon Syrian parishes to start schools (Tharakan 1924).

Many social thinkers and policy makers in the country may not know that as early as in 1830, Kerala schools had free noon meal scheme for all the children. The success of noon meal scheme conceived and implemented by St Chavara inspired sir C P Ramaswamy Iyer and he recommended it in all Government schools, now this scheme has been implemented all over the country. Prof. A Sreedharamenon, the noted historian and Padma Bhushan award winner

wrote in a note sent to Department of Research and Documentation, Chavara Hills, Kerala as follows:

I feel sorrow for not having been able to study more deeply about Father Chavara when I have often met in studying and writing about Kerala history. This note is meant at least in part to remove that sorrow. People like Father Chavara should be given the place they deserve.

Prof. A Sreedharamenon also agreed that Kerala history forgot the contributions of St Chavara till this century. As a pioneer of socio-religious reformation of Kerala, he had not recognised properly in spite of the fact that he did his reformation activities much before other so called socio- religious reformers like Sree Narayana Guru, Chattambi Swamikal and so on. The services of Christian leaders were most of the time received with a 'taken for granted' mentality from the belief that they are dedicated for the service of the society is another cause for this (Cyber Diary).

Though delayed it is obligatory for the Government, the academic institutions and the main stream historians to set off comprehensive research on the contributions of St. Chavara. That will be a fitting honour and a fitting acknowledgment to the great social reformer of 19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala.

Kerala, God's own country, enjoys and takes pride of having a 100% literacy rate; the state should salute before the great pioneer St Chavara who has invested his effort and hard work for the social reformation of Kerala in education sector.

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