

St. Chavara: A Harbinger of Human Dignity

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Abstract: St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara was a spiritual leader of the Syrian Catholics in the nineteenth century in Kerala, India. He had a great vision concerning the progress of the people and strived hard for the uplift of the whole society through various means. He was renowned as a sage entrepreneur who was a trend setter of public education, literary reforms, women emancipation and a harbinger of human dignity. He gave importance to the all-round development of people. This study aims describe the unique contributions of Kuriakose Elias Chavara to uphold human dignity in the nineteenth century and to identify the radical steps taken by him to imprint this ideology in the minds of people. The path showed by St. Chavara is followed by many and thus made a visible change in the society of Kerala all the way through the present. Consequently the study about the contributions of Chavara to uphold human dignity will be a useful and relevant base for many who dedicate their lives for ensuring the same.

Keywords: Chavara, entrepreneur sage, harbinger, human dignity, letter revolution, total leadership, trend setter, women emancipation.

I. INTRODUCTION

St. 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. The social situations of Kerala during his life time were deplorable due to the existence of a caste- oriented and socially unequal society and therefore upholding of human dignity was an alien concept. He worked hard to raise the status of his fellow beings and provide them better chances to progress. The words and deeds of St. Chavara proclaim his great vision for the people. The house of Charity organized by him can be understood as a way perpetuated his universal love and compassion for all. The ideology behind the ventures of educational foundations, religious congregations for the service of people and printing press were also read as his effort to raise the human status.

The concept of human dignity can be understood as the natural worth that inheres in every human being. It is a sacred concept. It must be respected and protected. The dignity of the human person is not only a fundamental right in itself but establishes the tangible foundation of fundamental rights. Dignity can be considered as a value that regulate the activities of persons. St. Chavara gave prime importance to the dignity of man from his faith that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. The basis for the theme of Human Dignity, the bedrock of Catholic Social Teaching, is also the same. Regardless of any factors or reasons we can think of, individuals have an inherent and immeasurable worth and dignity; each human life is considered sacred. This theme is about our radical equality before God that leads us to think no less of somebody because they are from a different place or culture, because they believe something different to you, or because of their work or employment situation. The dignity of man, who is endowed with both body and soul, was the basis for all social activities and humanitarian services of Chavara.

A. Objectives of the study:

To describe the unique contributions of Kuriakose Elias Chavara to uphold human dignity in the nineteenth century and to identify the radical steps taken by him to imprint this ideology in the minds of people.

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 methods adapted by Chavara towards a dignified society and the feature of his entrepreneurship to promote development in all realms and the impact of such actions of him in the later society.

II. TOWARDS A DIGNIFIED SOCIETY

Chavara always dreamt for a dignified society where people have more opportunities to progress and everyone enjoy equality and freedom without any discriminations and separations. He was the renaissance leader who brought an element of humanity into Kerala's brutal social order. 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 ensured that the directive was implemented and thus laid the foundation of a civil society (Radhakrishnan, 2014).

In the nineteenth century, not many felt the need for an egalitarian society. Kerala was in the stranglehold of the caste system. Polarized thinking along the lines of caste and creed was very much the norm. People were in revolt due to the rigidities of caste and religion. Every caste has a dialect of its own, each alien to the other. Caste bases held sway over society. Each caste presumed itself to be superior and maintained a distance from every other. Each had sub castes which never mingled. None dared to violate the rigidities inflicted by the caste system, and naturally, untouchability became the order of the day. Occupation too, was determined on the basis of caste, which again prevented intermingling. The mutual distance practised by those holding various jobs made any sort of space sharing impossible.

When Chavara embarked on his social crusade the concept of universal education was not yet visualized. Entry to government schools was based on caste. Admission was reserved for the upper crust of society. It was in this social milieu that in 1864, Chavara worked out a plan of action to mould a society that would unite irrespective of such distinctions. He was then the Vicar general of the Syrian church Catholic community in Kerala. By decreeing that parish schools admit children from all regions and castes, the Catholic Church made its entry to the seashores, river banks, hill tracts and midlands of Kerala with schools bigger than their parent churches. These schools evolved into launchpads for the creation of civil society in Kerala. They marked the beginning of reformist activities that united people. They became aware that they had a lot in common and they could work together. They also realized that a *namboodiri* -upper caste, would not be reduced to ashes (as was the belief then), if touched by a *pulaya* – lower caste (Radhakrishnan, 2014).

A. Total Leadership:

Leadership is a series of behavioural deals. It activates consensus and makes real a common goal. A total leader challenges the status quo, fosters creativity among followers, explores new ways of doing things and seeks new opportunities to learn. This is how inspirational communication works. This is when transformation takes place. Such a leader develops inspiration from mere sights. His achievements radiate energy all the time. Chavara was a total leader but not totalitarian in his style. He built consensus and conviction as is evident from the support he garnered from the parish schools, some of which later grew bigger than the parent parish churches. He was essentially diverse and versatile in creating communication contexts as we see in his poem martyrdom of Anastacia. He moved effortlessly from poetry to the conversation of the environment. However, he did not lose his prime focus on setting up a church that valued human dignity. He believed in a Church which was not merely a venue for scanning the sacred pages of bible, but a progressive ground for fathoming and translating the value of the gospel. He built a network of knowledgeable priests; using that network, he tried to equip the followers to find fresh ways to interpret the Bible and to live the Revelation of God's love on an ongoing basis.

Chavara had addressed the devil called toddy (a coconut based alcoholic drink). The gist of his drive against toddy was that it was the product of fermentation and that toddy consumption led to frenzy and anti-social behaviour. He tried to de-ferment that frenzy and had noticeable success. He had a rare insight into social cankers like dowry and child marriage. Widow marriage and care for orphans were also his priorities. When we look at these areas, the larger picture that

emerges is that Chavara worked for keeping the working class happy and productive. He initiated the process, in the first half of the nineteenth century, of saving Kerala from the tipping point of social decay (Gopinath, 2014).

B. Trend setter:

In nineteenth century Kerala, Chavara was a spiritual leader who connected the bible with the needs of the hungry people, and one who tried to make the church a community of God's people. He internalized 'love thy neighbour' and made it real with a series of timely actions that paved way for a better social and cultural environment in Kerala. He and his 'neighbours' were jointly involved in creating each other.

Chavara ventilated the church with wide humanitarian windows and the laymen started flocking in for rice, letter and linen. To him, such support to the poor was not a hand out. Rather, it was the primary phase of empowering the untouchables. 'Love thy neighbour' slowly picked up momentum thus contributing to the realization of a resurgent Kerala during the period of Sree Narayana Guru (1855-1932) and Vakkom Abdul Khadir Moulavi (1873-1932). In hindsight, we acknowledge that he was one of the early architects of a modern Kerala. His deeds were germinal. He made healthy and warm neighbourliness a key investment for an ethically strong and morally sound social engineering. The parish schools, the *pidiyari* system and the Sanskrit school are three among several classic examples of his inclusive vision based on good neighbourliness. (Gopinath, 2014).

III. ENTREPRENEUR SAGE

Entrepreneurship constitutes the ability of one to being a leader effectively. The entrepreneurs give clear form to vague ideas. They pay attention to history, apply critical and imaginative thinking and identify opportunities to create epochs by doing the right things and by doing things right. They perform the role of spiritual CEOs. It applies to Krishna and Jesus in abundant measure as is evident in the motivational guidance to Arjuna in the *Bhagvad Gita* and the monumental parables in the Bible. In the case of the nineteenth century Kerala, Chavara's contributions have entrepreneurial attributes matching the calibre of a modern CEO. He was an entrepreneur with a saintly vision. (Gopinath, 2014).

A. Educational reforms:

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 (Pathrapankal, 2004). 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.

B. Letter revolution:

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), *Maranaveettil 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. Institutions to uphold human dignity:

Chavara was very much compassionate towards the poor and marginalised 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 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 organisation ‘Confraternity of St. Joseph for happy death’. This was the beginning of the organised humanitarian work of the Kerala Church (Mundaden, 2008). In order to give food and clothing to the poor, Chavara had also bought few acres of land for financial support near the Mannanam Monastery.

St. Chavara believed and taught that the great help one can give to others is the help given at the time of one’s death. In December 1869, the second letter written by him to the parishners of Kainakari affirms this belief of him. In it he wrote: “...of all the helps given to a man, the greatest is that given at the moment of death. This is again, the greatest act of mercy. This is also the act of charity. One cannot measure the greatness of such a deed” (CWC, Vol. IV, IX/7, 1982).

This letter is a call to the people of Kainakari to start a house of Charity attached to their chapel. The members of the ‘Confraternity of Happy Death’ in their parish were advised to collect alms from the people and to start the house of charity in a modest way where they can give free hospice to the poor and the destitute and take care of all their material and spiritual needs. The instruction given by Chavara to the members of the confraternity for how to render their services to the sick and suffering can be recognised as the manual for such a new venture. He motivates them to do this act of kindness with utmost care and conviction. Hence of all benefits we can render to a man the greatest is what we render to him at the time of his departure from this world. Hence the important function of this confraternity and of all who take membership in this association will be to render this particular help at the time of death. Every member should go alone or in company with others to the sick person who is reported to be nearing his or her last and see that the last sacraments are administered to him or her, by taking turns and set a time-table for them to change their duty time. The infirmarian and his helpers will be responsible for this and all the members are bound to obey him. This act of mercy is the primary duty of the members. ... Many saints reached the height of sanctity by nursing the sick. The nursing of the sick may be the most difficult, unpleasant, detestable and degrading service before the fellowmen. But it is the most meritorious service before God (CWC, Vol. IV, IX/7, 1982).

Regarding the running of the institution St. Chavara gave them the following instructions: Keep a charity box with the label “Happy Death Charity Box”, unashamedly beg of others and raise a fund yourselves: build a modest Bungalow- like house of bamboo and other cheap materials, with just two rooms on either side of a veranda near your small chapel. You may call it an Upavi-sāla or Dharma- sāla [Charity Home] and shelter there orphans or the aged or the sick or beggars who have no one to take care of them. By God’s grace in the course of time it will be the first of the charity homes in Malabar (CWC, Vol. IV, IX/7, 1982).

Through the institution of this Charity Home Chavara gave a new dimension to the representation of the Christian faith in the land of Kerala. It reached out to a level to include the people outside of the margin of the caste- oriented, living only within the wall kind of society. This act clearly outlines the perspective of the human dignity concerns of Chavara. First

of all it was firmly rooted on the orientation towards the betterment of the other members of the society. Secondly, it motivated the laity of the church to come out of the frame, form and execute a charity institution for extending the hands of kindness to the members mostly from the outsiders of the community. This is a crucial step to awake the people to come out of the caste-oriented society- the practices of caste system was still existing in the Syrian catholic community in a strong manner at that time. Thirdly, this attempt was to establish a style of Charity work for all the parishes of the Syrian community. With this aim Chavara advised the leaders of this movement to convey the news regarding the *Upavi-śāla* to other parishes, receive their help, and act as a model for them in this new realm of the representation of Christian love. The most important factor of this attempt of Chavara was his respect towards the unprivileged people who happened to be the victims of unfortunate practices of the society and thus condemned to live and die in misery. This endeavour was the attempt to end that situation not only in Kainakari but also in the whole land of Malayalam.

Chavara lived at a time- the nineteenth century – when our society was passing through a period of intense depression and gloom. Life in Kerala society until the late 19th century was not based on the principles of social freedom and equality. Its chief characteristic feature was a deep chasm which separated the people who belonged to the high castes from those of the low castes. The people who belonged to the high castes enjoyed all the privileges and a high social status. In this period, untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability were at their peak. He was aware of the practices of the society and predicament of the poor at that time. Epidemics were a common occurrence. In His *Chronicles and Compunction of the Soul* he narrated the situations of the people during the time of epidemics. Moreover, he lost his beloved parents and brother in the attack of an epidemic around the period of 1820.

The following narration shows the miserable situation of the poor people during the period of epidemics. In 1833, because of the epidemic (*nadappudeenam*) the low caste people started to fell dead along the roads or residence areas. Because of untouchability they were not allowed to seek treatment from the doctors. Instead of controlling the epidemic or providing treatment for the victims, the only concern of the authorities was to protect the untouchability practices of the Savarna's. The circular promulgated by the government underlines this truth. Because of the epidemic, many people are dying by laying down along the roadsides or market and residence areas and the dead bodies are remaining there for three four days and they were getting distorted by the attack of dogs and foxes. Due to this situation it is difficult for the Brahmins to walk along the roads and this fact was come to the perusal of the king. Here it is deemed that this situation is unfortunate and degrading for this country. Hence, here onwards it is should not happen like this. The dead bodies should be removed and bury by the relatives of the deceased ones if any are remaining in the family or remove the bodies by the initiative of the government offices and ensure that they were not attacked by dogs or foxes (Bhaskaranunni, 2012).

This circular clearly shows that the concern of the government was only to safeguard the privileges of the Savarna's rather than to give the deserving respect to the poor people as human beings who were dying in this most unfortunate manner. The mind of St. Chavara always tuned towards the unprivileged people of the society. Therefore this kind of situations might have greatly influenced his human dignity perspectives. Here the human beings who were created in the image and likeness of god were treated with a station lower than animals. Surely, this circumstances influenced a great deal in the venture of Chavara to initiate the charity home where people have a place to die peacefully and respectfully and receive a proper burial afterwards.

D. Women emancipation:

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 (Panthplackal, 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 (Felix, 2004).

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).

IV. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

This study discloses the following facts regarding the role of St. Chavara as a harbinger of human dignity in the society of Kerala.

1. His integral outlook towards a dignified society by adopting a total leadership style and being a trend setter to create a public society in the caste ridden land of Kerala.
2. The radical steps taken by him being an entrepreneur sage in the ventures of educational reforms, letter revolution, Institutions to uphold human dignity and women emancipation which helped him to be a harbinger of human dignity.

On the basis of these findings it can justly concluded that St. Chavara was a harbinger of human dignity 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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