

CHAVARA A Milestone in Women's Cause

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Abstract: The world civilization has reached a new and dynamic stage of consciousness in which the right of all sections of society has been recognized to be a vital component of a global culture. In this new world scenario, the status of women has drawn special attention. It is accepted that status of women has a direct relationship with the level of development of a society. Indian scriptures speak of the dignity of women and there have been eminent women in ancient India. Women today are breaking the social and psychological barriers and coming out of the four walls storming the male bastions and proving themselves to be equals. They are now on the threshold of new era. In this article, we explore the contributions of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara to the society of Kerala and how he paved way for the revolutionary changes in the social life of women.

Keywords: Women, uplift, empowerment, education, liberation, society, patriarchy, congregations, religious, reform, handicraft.

1. Introduction

Women empowerment, education of women and liberation of women are phrases used very commonly today. In the nineteenth century, however, people in Kerala rarely heard the word 'women' mentioned in public. It was the time when they were largely deprived of even the basic rights of education, property inheritance and proper clothing. Women were not allowed to come out of the four walls of the kitchen. They were victims of many blind beliefs and superstitions. Women, especially the Syrian Catholic women, were extremely underprivileged religiously, socially, economically and educationally. It is into this society that Chavara was born and in time, he became a revolutionary leader who caused remarkable changes in the culture of Kerala in the 19th century.¹ He believed that woman could come to the

¹G. Karthikeyan, *Nanmayude Thelineerozhukunna Puzha*, in Alexander Paikkada, ed., *Kalam Namikkunna Karmayogi*, Kakkanad, 2013, 16.

forefront and her innate power could be awakened in order to usher in a renaissance of Kerala.

2. Chavara, the Pioneer of Women Empowerment

Living in the 19th century, Chavara was able to initiate far reaching programmes which have their effects felt even in the 21st century.² A famous Kerala historian, A. Sreedhara Menon notes: "I regret that I was not able to study Chavara more deeply. I have often come across with him in various studies and writings about the history of Kerala. Historians have failed in evaluating the life and achievement of Chavara."³

Chavara believed that women in the family and society could contribute immensely to the nation building process. He chose Koonammavu as the place from where he would launch his women empowerment programme. It was a place of farmers and fishermen, who worked hard to make both ends meet. The best way to set things right, was to provide them opportunities for education and various vocational programmes. The various activities of Chavara caused the total transformation of the womenfolk of Koonammavu. The awakening of womenfolk in Koonammavu brought far reaching results. The successors of Chavara also facilitate the enlightenment and integral development of the womenfolk through the apostolate of education.

3. The Status of Roman Catholic Women in 19th Century

In theory, Christianity recognizes the dignity and equality of women, but in practice, often they were assigned non-participatory role in the social and religious life. This is because of the patriarchal system that prevailed in the society at the time.⁴ Bernard Thomas, a church historian records that the nineteenth century Kerala Church did not consider women equal to men even in religious matters.⁵ Women were not supposed to attend the retreats meant for the spiritual growth of

²Govinthapilla, "Suriyani Sabhayil Ninnoru Navothana Nayakan" in Matthew Koottumkal, ed., *Chavarayachan*, Kottayam, 2004, 172.

³A. Sreedhara Menon, "Kalathinu Mumbe Nadanna Navothana Nayakan", in Matthew Koottumkal, ed., *Chavarayachan*, 20.

⁴K. P. P. Menon, *History of Kerala*, Vol. IV, New Delhi, 2001, 255-253.

⁵B. Thomas, *Malayalathile Karmelitha Moonamsabhayude Charithram*, Mannanam, 1980, 41.

the faithful.⁶ They were not expected to be present for ecclesiastical celebrations and social gatherings such as *sradham*, *adiyanthiram*, *marriages*, etc...⁷ They did not have freedom to express their views especially in the policy making process of church and society. There was not a single women represented in the *palliyogam* of St Thomas Christians.⁸

Until the 19th century, sufficient attention was not given to women's education in Kerala. A Christian missionary wrote in 1800: "Women get no education in childhood and in womanhood. There is no school for girls."⁹ The absence of a well-organized system of education, caste and communal barriers in the field of education compelled a large number of people especially women to live in illiteracy and ignorance.

Educating women in order to ensure their participation in social life was the major motive of several social and spiritual reformers in founding of a number of religious congregations for women in Kerala in the second half of the nineteenth century. Prominent among them are Congregation of the Mother of Carmel, Congregation of Carmelite Religious of Trivandrum, Franciscan Clarist Congregation and Sisters of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.¹⁰ At a time when neither education nor equal opportunity for women in society was available to women, imparting education irrespective of caste, creed or gender by these congregations contributed creatively to the transformation of the society in Kerala.¹¹

4. Chavara, the Educational Reformer

Chavara was a social and educational reformer to whom historians have not done justice.¹² In June 1861, Bishop Bernadinos appointed Chavara as the Vicar General of the entire community of the Syrian Christians in Malabar, to take care of their spiritual needs and to govern both the clergy and the laity with the powers given by the

⁶T. Panthaplackal, *Itha Njan Avidathe Daasan*, 2012, 124; see also C. Chacko, *Complete Works of Fr. Chavara*, Vol. IV, Mannanam, 1990, 114.

⁷K. C. Chacko, *Complete Works of Fr. Chavara*, Vol. IV, Mannanam, 1990, 114.

⁸Jossy, *CMC in the Shadow of the Most High*, Aluva, 1997, 11.

⁹P. Manavalan, *Kerala Samskaravum Krithva Missinarimarum*, Kottayam, 1990, 68.

¹⁰Suma Rose, *Polity Society and Women*, Trivandrum, 2004, 12.

¹¹Robin Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-Being*, New Delhi, 1992, 61.

¹²A Sreedhara Menon, "A Renaissance Leader Who Walked Ahead of His Time" in T. Panthaplackal, ed., *A Pearl Truly Indian*, Ernakulam, 2005, 81.

Holy See.¹³ After taking over as the Vicar General, Chavara gave a resplendent leadership to the Kerala Church. The root cause for the tremendous growth of education and hundred per cent literacy that Kerala achieved later can be traced back to a warning circular of Bishop Bernadinos, that Chavara got him write.¹⁴ The circular decreed that each parish should establish educational institutions, or else they would be debarred from the communion. As a result, 17 schools were established attached to the churches. This was just a humble beginning of the educational revolution that was to follow in Kerala.¹⁵

5. Foundation Convents to Uplift Women

Chavara believed in the innate power of women, who contributed to the much needed renaissance of the Kerala society. In 1859, the Archbishop appointed Chavara the Prior of the new monastery in Koonammavu. At the time, there was no proper institution exclusively for women in the 19th century. The chronicle of Koonammavu convent says that "In the land of Malayalam (Kerala) as for women even those who desired to live a virginal life had no way of embracing such a lifestyle. They had no option. They had to accept marriage and live as worldly women."¹⁶ When the presence of women was neglected in the spiritual world, he formed a group of women to lead them to help their own educational, spiritual and economic development.¹⁷ He strove hard to give women their rightful place in the society. It was for this purpose that he floated the idea of a religious congregation for women. His plan was to develop a group of women who would strive for the development of all women. This dream was materialized at the foundation of the convent at Koonammavu, by means of which he initiated many programmes to ensure freedom, equality and self-reliance of women.¹⁸

6. Spiritual Realization and Handicrafts

Chavara worked along with the Italian missionary Leopold Beccaro to establish a convent for those women who wished to lead a religious

¹³Xavier Koodapuzha, *Bharatha Sabha Charithram*, Kottayam, 1989, 465.

¹⁴Xavier Koodapuzha, *Bharatha Sabha Charithram*, Kottayam, 1989, 465.

¹⁵Z. M. Moozhoor, *Blessed Chavara the Star of the East*, Kottayam, 1993, 55.

¹⁶*Chronicle of Koonammavu Convent*, 1.

¹⁷C. Radhakrishnan, *Pothu Vidhyabyasam Prasansavum Prasakthiyum* (Mal.), Kakkanad, 2012, 27.

¹⁸S. Menon, *Kalathinu Mumbe Nadanna Navothana Nayakan*, 20.

life. Their efforts bore fruit with the founding of the CMC congregation on 13 February 1886, at Koonammavu. The primary aim of this foundation was to empower women in the society through their various apostolates of education, job-oriented training, health care, social service and spiritual renewal.¹⁹

The intention of the religious Congregation was not only to enhance the personal holiness of the members, but also to do "much good" in the society and to be "useful to all" especially women. Chavara clearly states the purpose of the new Congregation for women: "Besides striving for their own spiritual realization the members of the Congregation have to teach other girls, to pray and train them in some handicrafts." The new Congregation was clearly meant to be an effective agent for the uplift, reform action and wellbeing of women.

The first convent was popularly known as bamboo-mat convent thatched with coconut leaves. Many women followed the first members of the convent and adopted this way of life. This was a great beginning. Many placed their trust in the providence of God and joined the convent. As the number of the aspirants grew, several more houses of the congregation were established in quick succession.²⁰

Fr Porukara who was a contemporary of Chavara he wrote to the members of the convent at Koonammavu: "The hand which used to hold the wooden pestle for grinding rice and cleaning pots are now able to write and women who did not know herself or her Creator and was incapable of reading and speaking properly, and had lived like animals in the kitchen are now elevated to this noble state by the Almighty. Let him be praised for that."²¹

7. A Magnacarta for the Progress of Women

The service rendered by the religious congregation for the growth and development of Kerala culture bears witness to the fact that the step taken by Chavara in founding the religious congregation as a Magnacarta for the empowerment of women in Kerala.²²

One of the apostolic objectives of the foundation of the Congregation was to give training to the women of the locality in handicrafts. The help of efficient and qualified women were sought in order to train the sisters who were interested in arts and crafts.

¹⁹Jossy, *CMC in the Shadow of the Most High*, Aluva, 1997, 20.

²⁰*Chronicle of Koonammavu Convent*, Vol. II, 20-25.

²¹P. Kalluveetil, *Women TOCD Facts and Fabrications*, Aluva, 2013, 43.

²²Kalluveetil, *Women TOCD Facts and Fabrications*, 43.

Chavara records that he “went to a place called Anchuthengu and found a woman to teach them lace making, knitting and embroidery” and brought her with him. When the sisters were living in the bamboo-mat convent, an Anglo Indian lady called Francesca from Cochin was brought and was made to stay in the convent to teach them how to make flowers and do needle work, etc. A special work area was set apart in the convent for this training.²³

All that could be done to increase the efficiency and competency of the sisters was arranged, so that they could train not only the girls in the boarding house attached to the convent, but also the housewives in the neighbourhood. Since the main occupation of the people of Koonammavu was agriculture, and the women were free except during the agricultural seasons, in these periods they attended the vocational schools run by the sisters. The women of Koonammavu began to earn their livelihood by means of the handicrafts and small scale industries. Later, Embroidery and the making of rosaries spread to other places and became a source of income for many families. The women who used to depend completely on men became earning members by making maximum use of their leisure time.²⁴

8. Activities of Chavara to Uplift Women

The sisters were certain that once the women and the children were taught the crafts, they would pass it on to the next generation, which would be able to understand the value of hard work and self-sufficiency. They would systematically plan their own lives, become intellectually and technically efficient. Above all, they would equip themselves with a sense of security and self-confidence which are essential for a successful life, especially in a developing agricultural society. The flowering of Chavara’s charismatic concept of integral development of women and society through convent-school and boarding houses became a reality.

Chavara and Beccaro considered that the training of the nuns in arts and crafts would be helpful in organizing various self-earning schemes for the welfare of women. They gave much importance to vocational training, when they were planning the first religious house and the new convent building.

Realizing that their spiritual daughters were called to teach and encourage those who come seeking consecrated life, the fathers

²³Jossy, *CMC in the Shadow of the Most High*, Aluva, 1997, 40.

²⁴Jossy, *CMC in the Shadow of the Most High*, 40.

envisaged new practical measures. This training programme given to the youngsters was commonly known as '*edukamthath*' meaning boarding house. It was a building attached to the convent for children, for their boarding, learning and training in the handicrafts. The first boarding house was opened at Koonammavu in 1868, where the girls were given training to become good Christian ladies. It was a training centre where catechism, meditation, handicrafts, language, mathematics, science, music and cooking were taught.

When the formal school for girls was opened on the convent premises at Koonammavu in 1872, the curriculum introduced there was an extension of curriculum of the boarding house, in which great importance was given to the spiritual, moral, social and the intellectual development of the girls with a view to achieving an integrated development.

Koonammavu being an underdeveloped village, parents were quite unwilling to send their girls to school. The sisters visited the houses trying to convince parents of the need to educate their daughters. Gradually the strength of the school increased, which necessitated the construction of an extension for the school. Establishing schools attached to each convent became the part of education policy as well as the charism of the congregation.

The sisters took up the responsibility of giving formation not only to the candidates of their own community, but also to those of other religious communities. Being the first religious community in Kerala for women, other bishops also requested this service from them. The bishop who visited the convent at Koonammavu in 1871 invited them to establish a convent in the vicariate of Kollam.²⁵ The chronicles record that, as a result, in 1875, the Novices from Kollam came to Koonammavu and received formation there.

Another field of apostolic activity of sisters in the early age was caring for the orphans and destitute. In 1880, the first orphanage was opened at Koonammavu attached to the convent, where more than a hundred inmates were cared for. They were not only fed and dressed well but also were given training in technical skills, such as cooking, needle work and embroidery and making rosaries.²⁶

²⁵Josy, *op. cit.*, 36.

²⁶T. Panthaplackal, *Chavarayachan Oru Rekhachitram*, Kochi, 2004, 117.

Chavara is remembered gratefully for his contribution to the uplift of the downtrodden in both the material and the spiritual realms.²⁷ Nowhere else in the country were the reforms so profound and so pervasive, redefining social conventions and family life beyond recognition, as it was made in Kerala. The CMC, the religious congregation that was founded by Chavara, contributed immensely to the transformation of the society by bringing education within the reach of womenfolk.

A cursory glance at the role of women in religious congregations and their various activities to empower women in Kerala reveals the great contributions they made in transforming the society. As a result of their dedicated and selfless services, the women of Koonammavu, weakened and helpless as they were, were transformed into a strong and powerful section of the society, with self-confidence, responsibility and leadership. The changes that occurred were clearly visible in their enhanced status in different spheres of life. Women who used to depend completely on men became earning members by making maximum use of their leisure time.

9. Conclusion

Chavara's vision anticipated modern developments in bringing women to the forefront of the society. Educating women and ensuring their participation in various areas of social life were his motives in founding a religious congregation for women. At a time when neither education nor equal opportunity for women in society was the order of the day, CMC contributed creatively for the uplift of women. Today, in different parts of the country and abroad, they are engaged in education, pastoral and social apostolates. They run schools, university colleges, boarding houses and hostels for girls and professional job-oriented courses and special schools for the handicapped.

²⁷A. S. Menon, *A Renaissance Leader who Walked Who Walked Ahead of His Time*, in T. Panthaplackal, ed., *A Pearl Truly Indian*, Ernakulam, 2005, 77.