

MEDIA PRODUCTION REVIEW

***The Footprints of a Saint* (A Short Biographical Film on St Kuriakose Elias Chavara)**, Direction: James Muttickal CMI; Running Time: 50 minutes; Released on 3 December 2014.

People who have travelled to the central western part of Kerala, a Southern state of India, must have enjoyed Kuttanadu, the local Rice-bowl. A primarily agrarian area that saw in the 19th century, the eventful life of a local priest and a great reformer whose life was fervent with devotion to the society and the Church. This priest's name was Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a man who won the hearts of all his contemporaries. *The Footprints of a Saint*, a short biographical film in English by James Muttickal is truly inspirational. It concentrates on the fundamental passion that Chavara's life was based on – pursuit of holiness and devotion to the Church and society. The movie tries to give, as the narrative introduction to the movie by a cute girl points out, a few snapshots on the life and activities of the saint.

Chavara's life was filled with the love for God exhibited in his concern for the Church and joy that he found in exercising the compassion for his people in the society. Almost every scene of the movie contains these two elements. Love is the reason why he sacrifices everything for God. Joy is the reason why he likes the way he lives and cannot live any other way. Because of joy, the great joy that he found, young Chavara earnestly speaks to the relatives regarding his return to the seminary, to pursue his dream.

The film is dealing with the 19th century; historically set in a village called Kainakari in Kerala. The costumes, appearances, cultural aspects, down to the sets and props correspond to the time. One of the remarkable features of the film is its breath-taking cinematography. The scenes of the picturesque estuaries of Kerala are exquisite. The camera has been wielded by Prakash.

The film is of sweet purpose and great simplicity that covers the years of Chavara from the cradle through the boyhood, teenage, youth and maturity, and the eventual formation of a group of peaceful, loving followers that finally culminate with the official ecclesiastical recognition of what was to become the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate, which he founded with two others.

Davis Elanjikal, a priest, although not known for his roles, gives a magnificent performance as Chavara, the nineteenth-century cleric with spirit and godliness. From the moment Chavara presents himself as a new young priest, he etches this bold humanitarian approach with deep and passionate strokes, revealing a man of sensitive nature and boundless energy and aim to do good. Not only have his features suited to this role but also his entire acting. He brings the saint to life. However, several of his moves disappointed me when compared to my expectations of how I imagined Chavara. The artistes who portray Chavara's confreres and higher authorities are believable too. For those who know the history of Chavara, all these figures, except one, are portrayed in ways that mirror what we know of their actual characters. The young couple in the opening scene shows great versatility in playing Chavara's father and mother. The latter is prominent as she played a significant role in moulding his young mind. These portrayals are true to life and true to the style and spirit of Chavara's life and work.

The film does not neglect the controversial issues: the Archbishop's attempts to curtail the construction of the monastery in progress, and the antagonism of the Roccas faction. Again, in the midst of the conflict that makes for drama, we see the growth of character and the depth of idealism that never left Chavara, but helped him become a father and teacher to the Church in Kerala.

To those who say: "This is a religious movie and since I am not religious, I won't watch this," a suggestion: such a point of view will not open you to those wonderful social horizons in life presented in the movie like illiteracy, epidemics, religious harmony and so on, but will close you within your own world. This production, unlike several other purely religious productions, does not show religion as it isn't - full of codes, duties, fear of God the Judge but rather religion as full of commonplace simple joys and moments of loving service.

Powerful moments in the movie are several. The producers have put into the film some poignant and shocking demonstrations of class discrimination in the 19th century Kerala. Most vivid and singularly dramatic is one isolated scene in which Chavara goes into the hut of Pappu, a low caste boy. Captivating is the eloquent, but silent but positive reaction of his mother to the magnanimity of the priest. This one scene is a memorable achievement - a rare bit of brilliant cinema - distinguished. The moment is so exciting as well as dramatic that the realism of the character stands out as it is accentuated by the

affectations found in most other characters. The angle of the camera here is appropriate too.

Certainly, there are the downsides to the movie. There is a certain whimsical staginess to most of the performance, which partly comes from the era, which the setting belongs to, and partly from the director's background in live theatre. The make-up given to some characters, the choice costumes that lack historical research, and part of the music employed are more suited to stage performance. If you cannot get past it, this film will not work for you. But for anyone who can, there's a lot to appreciate in James' hagio-pic of Chavara.

James makes no special claims to historical accuracy as Chavara would make his religious profession before a venerable old silver-bearded monk twice his age whereas history would point out that the character was younger than Chavara. The film is also flavoured with a pseudo-stunt involving a snake that gets little credit in our more savvy and cynical day. Similarly, James downplays the role of Leopold Beccaro in the foundation of the convent for the nuns.

The innovative use of music by Anto Amarnad is one of the attractive features of the film. The rendering of one of the poems of Chavara in English is sweet and would have done well as the theme music. The accompanying Syriac and Latin chants on appropriate occasions is clever. However, the film is scored to a point that makes your ears hurt with unprofessional editorial cuts of the background music effects.

It is not only a biopic of Chavara but it also wonderfully makes use of extensive social environment of his time. His words about "God's will" became the fundamental words of the Indian Carmelites, one of the religious congregations he founded. Absolutely great is the script, although linguistic refinement would have been in place. Similarly, a language expert could have helped the young Chavara teaching Syriac to his friends.

What really is strange, however, is that the congregation that Chavara founded, the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate, with various studios in possession, and experts working with them, running various higher educational institutions where courses on media productions are galore, could come up with only this stuff on the occasion of the great event of the Canonization of their founder. However, after the preliminary investigation, it was revealed to me, first of all, that the film was the initiative of a regional talent who mustered local resources and talents and employed them in the production which resulted in an amateurish creation. Secondly, the

film was not produced on the occasion of the canonization, but on a previous occasion, but resurfaced on the great festive occasion along with an audio production from the same producer. Hence, you would not watch this movie after *Ten Commandments*, *Jesus of Nazareth*, *Ben Hur* and other big budget movies. Nor will you expect any professional standard from the movie.

In spite of all that, the film does give us an evocative image of a passionately good man. And that is something worth looking at. I admire the courage of the producer to launch such a project with a limited budget, limited choice of characters and in a language foreign to every artiste involved, himself including. Although the film is not a top production, which is proved by the newcomers on the screen and behind, they are at their best as far as the performance is concerned. They have made the film nice to watch since the content is hard as Chavara's life itself was.

I recommend everyone who is not prone to mystical and extraordinary ways of life, to watch this film, particularly youngsters who have love in their heart and seek for joy, in service to their society. Those who feel lonely or who think that misfortunes in life mark the end of the journey of life, will see and feel a slightly different light after this movie. No matter what historical period, religion, class, belief and country you belong to, where there is love, there God is present with joy as a gift. This movie will touch you and make you feel that no one around you needs to feel helpless, illiterate, lonely and an orphan, because you are there.

Finally, a brief historical note: Chavara died in 1871 and was buried at Koonammavu and later, his mortal remains were transferred to Mannanam. He was canonized in 2014 by Pope Francis. The people visiting the tomb for more than a century now, bear witness to one truth: Love is eternal and only love can give you joy and together, they conquer the world!

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