

BOOK REVIEW

John Mannarathara, ed., *The Life and Legacy of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Christ University and Viva Books, 2015; pages xi + 255, ISBN: 978-81-30930-18-3.

Some books are must-take-aways. *The Life and Legacy of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara* is so for several reasons. (1) The volume presents itself as a canonization souvenir that appeared at the time of the canonization of St Chavara. (2) Unlike the conventional Souvenir volumes, it does not fill its pages with photos and ads (except for the only advertisement for Christ University discreetly placed on the inner back sleeve of the cover page), but solid profiles that are more picturesque than any photos. (3) The book presents a spectrum of celebrated personalities in South India from various blocks of society thinking aloud of Chavara and telling the readers how they evaluate the various aspects of the life of the saint from their perspectives. (4) When put together, these various views paint a historical life-sketch of Chavara from a modern angle. (5) For those who are artistically inclined, there are several unique and original scratch-sketches of Chavara in black-and-white from equally celebrated artists in Kerala that bring out the unique features of Chavara's personality.

Chavara was a brilliant writer, one of the best manufacturers of Malayalam prose in the 19th century age; his literature sparkle, fascinate and inform. The editor has excellently conceived the layout of the volume thematically and has made a confluence of writers from two streams possible. They penetrate deeper layers of his complex personality. The first stream comprises of the renowned writers who exalt the saint who, like themselves, contributed to the literary world of his time. This is accomplished in a laudable manner by some of the stars of the cultural life in Kerala, like Joseph Mundassery, K. M. Tharakan, Sukumar Azhikode and Govinda Pillai who explore the uniqueness of Chavara and his relevance to the world today.

The second stream of contributors to the volume consists of illustrious writers who have proved their mettle as multi-dimensional contributions to the making of a modern civil society. These writers have put Chavara on a global pedestal, with several revolutionary contributions that have made the volume really substantial. The tribute literature that they have produced explores the avant-garde

personality of Chavara who stands out especially in his writings, socio-cultural developments that he initiated and his liturgical innovations. They unravel the manifold steps that Chavara took in order to lay the foundation for a new civil society in Kerala where all had a place of honour. They consider him a non-conformist leader who was beyond vested interests.

The claim the editor makes that each article in the book is distinct, but together they create a symphony is in valid. The writers consider Chavara from various angles such as mysticism, entrepreneurship, justice, environment, social reformation, literature, theatre and above all spiritual leadership. The contributors from both these streams write from varying perspectives, but make an unbroken flow of literary presentation. Collectively they have painted the image of a paterfamilias who was able to lead a people to the next rung of existence in various levels. They seem to celebrate the versatile personality of Chavara who breathed life into the society of Kerala. Together, they take the reader on a chronological tour through the days ranging from the period when Chavara was but a reference confined to church circles to the present century in both the society and the Church have recognized his overarching contribution to the making of modern Kerala. They have documented Chavara as the rescuer of Kerala from the morass of social decay and spiritual stagnation.

Most of the entries in the volume acknowledge the astuteness of Chavara in bringing together two powerful tools of social transformation: the church and school. It is claimed by the work that the church-school combination was the beginning of the end of the blatant social injustice in Kerala which had an impact on all classes of society. Thus, Chavara became the treasured property of all sections of the society.

The managerial gurus of the modern world bank on the interface of spirituality and entrepreneurship and overrate the combination as an invention. However, that is exactly what Chavara advocated way back in the nineteenth century. These two features of Chavara bear witness to the fact that versatility and saintliness are dynamic experiences and ever new interpretations of life and society from unexplored perspectives is a condition for sustaining the momentum that was initiated.

As Chavara symbolizes equity in a world of widening economic divide and spiritual void, the objective of the volume as the editor claims, is to heal our society. It is for this reason that Chavara

negotiated the untrodden path of the Kerala of his time and paved a way for the society to get to a calmer and warm harbour. The life of Chavara as presented by these scholars and writers gives us the hope that social life need not always spin out of control, but some people, though few and far between, can step in and check and control the speed of the spin that our cyber society has gathered. Only such people can propose and provide an antidote to some modern philosophies that disintegrate the traditional and long standing spiritual values, family-tie, patriotism, ethics and integral vision of life.

Praiseworthy is the selection of the contributors who represent almost the entire social spectrum of Kerala which was the immediate beneficiary of the life and works of Chavara. In these writers, we meet the cross section of the society that admires the saint and his contributions. The editorial work by Mannarathara and team is excellent. The volume has been planned and executed to perfection. The narrative flow of the articles without much of swerves and flops bears witness to this editorial expertise of all those who worked behind the volume.

Exquisite and original are the sketches on Chavara in various profiles that are strewn throughout the volume. From the names of the artists it is clear that they come from a variety of backgrounds: the budding ones as well as the established ones. These illustrations perfectly blend in with the themes that are in discussion in each article or section.

The work is complete with a chronological presentation of the milestones in the life of the saint. It gives a historical overview of the time, person and the various significant steps taken by Chavara for the society.

Although every line of the work is really enjoyable, reviewing the book critically, we need to make a note or two on how the volume could have avoided a few editorial or literary snags. First of all, some of the contributions are translations from Malayalam. As it happens in most translations, the lustre and sheen of such entries compared to others is missing. The natural beauty of the original literary expressions has not been brought forth. This, certainly, must have been unavoidable given the nature of the work. Secondly, in the foreword, at least Hitler could be avoided as a historical personage to compare Chavara with. Although it is an antithetical comparison, he stands out as an odd one. Thirdly, the repeated number of entries by M. Gopinath, scholarly as they are, could have been replaced by representatives of other sections of the society. Fourthly, though

common, the typo in the title on page 242 stands out. Finally, a mention of the foundation of the CMI Congregation, in the chronological table would have been in place. Considering the beautiful sketches that adorn the pages, perhaps, the illustrations on pages 71 and 72 were to be avoided. Similarly, the photos that appear from time to time break the unique flow of artistic illustrations.

Yet, to criticise this book is to recognise its high quality, which demands the most searching criticism. These snags mentioned above are insignificant compared to the glory that the volume is bathed in. It was indeed a must-take-away that I am proud to own. Mannarathara's organizing capacity in putting these pages together is impeccable and enviable, his style lucid and fresh; this is a work that is consistently challenging and readable. As a reference book on the life, activities, contributions and literature of Chavara, as a source book on the contemporary literary figures in South India and as a valuable volume for my inspirational reading, it adorns my little library, although I had to make a little extra space for it to fit in, for it is in the souvenir size. I am proud to own it and read it and recommend it to anyone looking for such a reading.

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