

**Theological Studies on Saint Chavara 16**

**SOCIAL  
TRANSFORMATION  
THROUGH SPIRITUAL  
EMPOWERMENT**

**The Social Vision and Mission  
of Saint Chavara**

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**The Social Vision and Mission  
of Saint Chavara**

**Jose Kuriedath CMI**

**Dharmaram Publications**  
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***Social Transformation Through Spiritual Empowerment***

The Social Vision and Mission of St. Chavara

**Jose Kuriedath CMI**

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## THEOLOGICAL STUDIES ON SAINT CHAVARA

Kuriakose Elias Chavara (1805-1871) – a Carmelite religious priest and professor of theology (Malpan), who pioneered consecrated life in the Syro-Malabar Church by founding the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI in collaboration with Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukara, in 1831, the first indigenous religious congregation for men, and the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel (CMC in collaboration with Leopold Beccaro OCD in 1866) – is widely recognized for his pioneering efforts to reform the Catholic Church in Kerala and broader nineteenth-century society. His credible Christian witness, along with the leadership he offered to the St Thomas Christians, at a time when they were undergoing multiple jurisdictional crises, a spiritual and disciplined growth in the Kerala Church.

Canonised on 23 November 2014, Chavara's personal sanctity and Christian wisdom have been identified as unique. While secular society admires his contributions to uplifting those existing on the margins and who were socially ostracised through educational and social initiatives, the fundamental core of all his achievements is solidly established in his filial discipleship to Jesus Christ, whom he addressed 'ente nalla appa' (my beloved father).

Chavara had a firm foundation in Christian faith, which is clearly visible throughout his life and is testified by those who knew him. He articulated his views and perspectives primarily based on his personal encounter with Jesus and only secondarily based on his readings and theological reflections. They are available to us through his extant writings, which are

published in the four volumes of the Complete Works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara. Some of these works, recognized as efforts hitherto unprecedented in Indian literature, offer us a goldmine of rich and sound theological insights. Although his access to scientific Christian literature was minimal (if not completely absent), his writings draw from the biblical as well as other Christian traditions, which he had faithfully and creatively interpreted for the enhancement of the faith of the Christian community that he had catered to throughout his life.

Theological Studies on Saint Chavara, a joint effort of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI) and Congregation of the Mother of Carmel (CMC), attempts to promote and publish the fruits of scientific investigation into the unique and varied theological insights of Chavara in the form of monographs. These theological investigations will be instrumental in appreciating and popularising the sound and solid theological contributions he made toward enhancing Catholic faith in the nineteenth century, which, in turn, indicate that he deserves titles such as 'Father of the Syro-Malabar Church' and 'Doctor of the Church.' As the publication of this series is undertaken with the blessings of the Synod of the Syro-Malabar Archiepiscopal Church, which has also benefitted from the eminent theological acumen, pastoral insights, and ecclesiastical leadership of Chavara, these studies will hopefully bring to light the multifarious theological heritage that he had bequeathed to the Church and the subsequent generations of faithful in India.

**Naiju Jose Kalambukattu CMI**

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General Editor



## Foreword

A brief anecdote from the Hasidic tradition tells us that: *One day, a young disciple asked his elderly teacher: 'Rabbi, can you tell me why God appeared in ancient times to our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob while today no one sees Him anymore?' After a long silence, the old rabbi answered: 'Because we no longer know how to stoop low enough.'* Many interpretations can be given to this puzzling story. Still, among all the possible explanations, the interpretation brings us back to the need to approach God by taking a look 'from below.' To discover the face of God, to access his revelation, one must stoop to the earth, and seek him among men and women, because God 'has pitched his tent among us' (Jn 1:14). Reading sacred Scripture 'from below' means lowering oneself to real people, descending into the abyssal depths of human limitations. The Book *Social Transformation Through Spiritual Empowerment: The Social Mission and Vision of St Chavara* by Fr Jose Kuriedath CMI is an attempt to understand how St Chavara tried to lower himself to real people descending into the reality of human limitations and to strengthen them to overcome this situation. The uniqueness of this book while presenting the social mission and vision of St Chavara emerges from the intense God-experience of St Chavara and the spiritual energy from it which they wanted "to channel to the society to transform it as part of building up the Kingdom."

Fr Jose Kuriedath, a prolific writer and renowned sociologist, analyses the social vision of St Chavara which emerged in the social context of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which was

characterized by casteism and ignorance. The foundation of a religious society which was envisioned by Fr Thomas Palackal, Fr Thomas Porookara and St Kuriakose Elias Chavara, the disciple of Thomas Palackal Malpan, was the result of the strong thinking that the evil that existed in the society had its impact in the life of the Church and even of the priests. Therefore, the presence of a religious community could facilitate this radical transformation in the society of Kerala and the church. The social involvement of St Chavara who had to take up the leadership of the newly formed religious society after the death of the other two co-founders and to expedite the canonical foundation of the Congregation on 8<sup>th</sup> December 1855, evolved over the years through his reflection of God-experience and theological vision of Christian life and role of the Church in the society. All the social involvements St Chavara made in promoting quality education for all, initiating various social projects and media were the outcome of this reflection reading the signs of the times. Hence, the author explains that the social vision of the Congregation is that of St Chavara which considers social apostolate an essential and integral aspect of God-experience. Thus, the objective of this study on the social vision of St Chavara is to remind the CMI's that God is experienced through social involvement to make the lives of other human beings better.

This goes in line with the magisterium of the Church that the concrete lives of imperfect men and women, with their dramas and victories, their 'joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties' (*Gaudium et Spes* §1), is the place of the travail of redemption; it is the soil in which, through Christ, the seed of new life is

sown. Saint Paul affirms this when he writes that 'the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now' and waits in hope to be 'set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Rom 8:21-22). This is well understood in a dense passage of *Evangelii Gaudium*, in which it is affirmed that the understanding of the social dimension can no longer be understood as an addition to the gospel, a moment subsequent to it according to the adage '*operari sequitur esse*', but rather as its interior, intrinsic reality: *The kerygma has a clear social content: at the very heart of the Gospel is life in community and engagement with others. The content of this first proclamation has an immediate moral implication centred on charity* (EG §177).

The author is trying to establish that the social involvement of St Chavara and the Congregation was not merely from a functional perspective but was the result of the spiritual empowerment which he garnered for himself and the society through his constant and intimate relationship with God, and the channelling of the same into the various socio-cultural needs. Being a spiritual leader of his time, he was primarily concerned about his community. However, he saw that it should not be confined to them alone, but rather should be extended to be an inclusive one. Therefore, all that was undertaken by the new religious congregation under the leadership of St Chavara was influenced by the teaching of the Church which considered social involvement and reform an integral part of the building up of the kingdom of God. Therefore, his vision of social transformation cannot be confined

to mere social action for the sake of doing welfare activities but rather an integral part of the spiritual endeavour which was the objective of the foundation of a new religious community in Kerala.

Fr. Jose Kuriedath CMI has made an efficacious presentation of the social vision and mission of St Chavara and of the CMI Congregation and the legacy of working for the social transformation of the Kerala society and the church. This is a fitting contribution he has made at this juncture as the Congregation is preparing for the Bicentennial of the Congregation. It puts forward a challenge to everyone who is a disciple of Christ to work strenuously to continue this legacy and to be catalysts of social change in the present world. This will be the measure that we have for the authenticity of our life in the Congregation as a committed CMI.

Finally, I would like to thank and congratulate Fr Jose Kuriedath for this in-depth study made on the Social Mission and Vision of St. Chavara which consisted of effecting a social transformation through spiritual empowerment, I am happy to present it to the readers for serious study and reflection.

Fraternally yours in our Lord

Fr Josey Thamarassery CMI  
Vicar General

## **Introduction**

Some time back, when the 'Chavara Writers' Forum' asked me to write a book on St. Chavara's Social Vision, I gladly accepted the task for two reasons – one personal and the other theological. Looking back to my younger days of formation and recalling my own meditations and reflections on what a religious priest's call chiefly entails, I was always convinced that ministering to the dawn of the "acceptable time of the Lord" (Lk. 4:19) should be the primary duty of religious priesthood. The words of Jesus at Nazareth, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, for he has anointed me to bring the good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord" (Lk 4:18-19) have always fascinated and challenged me and gradually convinced me that this itself was the responsibility of every priest who shared in his priesthood. As I understood, the acceptable time of the Lord indicated by Jesus has been the imminent arrival of 'the Kingdom of God that was at hand' (Mk. 1:15). And the kingdom of God, as the Gospel tries to teach us, is nothing but the life in justice and peace as the children of God, accepting God as the Father and all other human beings as His children. The religious and priests, in the words of Pope Francis, are called to proclaim this kingdom and wake up the world to listen to its good news, and also nurture its growth and spread in the whole humanity in the spirit of the prayer which Jesus personally taught us and which we recite most often, 'thy kingdom come'. The various aspects of religion like beliefs, doctrines, rituals, practices, norms, rules,

organizational structures etc are just different supporting means for constantly motivating and enabling us to bring about the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. In other words, a human society in which all live as brothers and sisters in peace and in which everyone enjoys peace and harmony of life on account of the ever-renewing interpersonal relationships as children of God, or in other words, a society of ever enhancing humanization is the kingdom of God that Jesus envisaged, suffered and died to bring about.

So, from my early years, maybe due to frequent contacts with the religious priests, I was more attracted to their lifestyle, particularly of the CMI Congregation (Carmelites of Mary Immaculate), who were more visibly engaged in different kinds of social ministries like education, youth formation, social apostolate etc. which were, in my young eyes, directly related to the betterment of the society and human life. The parish priests were seen as mostly engaged in sacred rituals, which I did not see as very effectively contributing to making people better human beings, even though theoretically they were meant to be so. So, during the early days of choosing my priestly vocation, when I was asked if I was interested to go to a seminary to become a diocesan priest, I declined the offer and categorically showed my interest in becoming a religious priest.

While studying the life and mission of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara, the most prominent among the founders of the congregation, later, I realized that the manifold ministries he initiated and the pioneering step of establishing the first indigenous religious congregation for priests in India, were all

aimed at enlightening and empowering the Kerala society and making it more humanized. I felt that by becoming a religious priest himself and starting a community of religious priests, Chavara intended to immerse himself in the ministry of nurturing the kingdom, much more effectively than a parish priest. In fact, I further discovered that by establishing a religious congregation of priests under the inspiration of his mentor Guru Malpan Thomas Palackal he took the bold and pioneering step to nurture the kingdom, much more effectively than done till then by the parish priests of the community. Thus I felt an inner attachment to the vision of the saint; so I hoped that while exploring and explaining the social vision of Chavara, I might be exploring and trying to expose my own vision of what I should become and help others become, or what my own personal and social vision should be.

Secondly, from a theological point of view, it is the value system of religion that has always attracted the theologian in me much more than its dogmas and rituals. The latter, according to me, have only an instrumental role in helping the values take root in us and transform us; the values, on the other hand, transform our lives and make us better human beings. St. Chavara was not at all finicky about the rituals and practices of his religion. He was open to accept any ritual or practice from the different streams of the Catholic tradition, and pick and use whatever were useful for making people better human beings. So, unlike the present day liturgists who are very rigid about sticking to the confines of one's own ritual tradition and rejecting everything else from other traditions, and who seem to draw a surreal and isolated 'kingdom experience' from the

meticulous performance of such rituals (they seem to be over-agitated about any small mistake or deficiency in the performance of these rituals, while least worried about defects in Christian personality), Chavara was not at all reluctant to take and introduce devotions, rituals and practices from Latin and Malankara traditions. For him, the yardstick for choice was their effectiveness in helping people become better humans, not for a short period of religious experience within the walls of the church, but all along life wherever a person lives.

Thus, Chavara had a spiritual and value-centred objective in his ministry. He was convinced that mere reform of rituals and practices would not change the society, but only the transformation of persons from within would make the society better. And such betterment itself was, in his eyes, the blossoming of the kingdom of God on earth. So, every step he took to change the society was for him not merely a social service but a spiritual or pastoral work as well. He did not separate and confine spirituality into the performance of spiritual exercises and leave the efforts for social progress as mere social work or annexures to religion. In other words, for Chavara humanization begins from within as an inner transformation through God-experience and radiates to the whole human society, and that itself was for him the building up of God's kingdom. It was with this vision that he initiated a spiritual and social transformation in Kerala.

### **Holiness of Social Transformation**

Now, coming to our times, after long years of prayer and preparation, Fr. Kuriakose Elias Chavara was declared a saint



by Pope Francis on 23 November, 2014. So Chavara is now honoured as a saint in the Universal Church and even by many people of other faiths. When prayers were made for Chavara's canonization and eventually when the Church made him a saint, it was declaring that the founder of the CMI Congregation was irrevocably, i.e. with finality, affirmed as an exemplary and holy person who practiced the Christian virtues heroically and experienced God intimately in life.

All the same, many of the writings on St Chavara as well as several speakers still seem to project him more as a mere social reformer who took the pioneering steps in various fields of life and thereby changed the Kerala society than as a saint. One can very well understand such a tone in the writings and speeches of secular historians, social analysts and politicians, who are more interested in social changes than in spiritual growth of the people and who look with their secular eyes on those who initiate such changes. Moreover, they may be more interested to make his personality more acceptable to all groups than to the Catholics who regard him as a saint too. One would never deny the changes St. Chavara introduced or reforms he initiated in such fields as education, communication media, social service, priestly formation, religious practices and so on. It is also true that he boosted social mobility and social integration through education, opened the doors of knowledge to all, particularly the Catholics, through press and print media, pioneered the uplift of the marginalized through social services and so on. But was St. Chavara a mere social reformer at the core? I see a disconnection between our honouring him as a saint and the way he is projected in the general society. It is

this apparent disconnection that has been agitating my mind to investigate in depth the unique nature of St. Chavara's social apostolate and the vision behind his several initiatives in this area. This book is an effort to examine it in depth with the help of available evidence and show its strength and weakness from theological and sociological points of view.

So, it may be asked: what was the foundation of St. Chavara's varied pioneering works? The following pages try to examine the multi-faceted personality of St. Chavara, and see how his social vision and mission were shaped by his personality. In other words, the study tries to analyze how spiritual power became an effective source and instrument to motivate Chavara and his colleagues to involve themselves in the society of the nineteenth century and bring about transformation in the various fields in unimaginable ways.

## CHAPTER I

### **The Need for Social Transformation in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and Development of Chavara's Social Vision**

The personality formation the young Kuriakose received at home was, as far as we know, chiefly spiritual and intellectual, with some elementary social skills to live in a society; his own mother laid the foundation of Christian spiritual and religious life in him through example as well as instructions on basic Christian life and the training given in manifold spiritual exercises. He also received basic knowledge of language, arithmetic etc. from the elementary school that existed in the village. At the tender age of thirteen he was picked up by Malpan Thomas Palackal to join the seminary that he had been running at Pallipuram for training young boys for priesthood. Thereafter, his formation was under the care of the Malpan. Kuriakose spent almost eleven years at the seminary before being ordained priest in 1829.

During his studies for priesthood, Kuriakose was trained mostly in Syriac, the language of liturgy of the Syrian Catholic community, theology and a few allied subjects like Latin. Since the seminary or the *Malpanate*, as it was called then, was a one-teacher training centre; his main tutor was Malpan Thomas Palackal himself. We are told that Fr. Palackal was an enthusiastic teacher very committed not only to training his students in the conventional theological and liturgical subjects but also to supplementing the same with additional knowledge

available from other sources. It is noted by St. Chavara himself that Fr. Thomas used to go to Tamilnadu and get relevant study materials from Tamil.<sup>1</sup> We must remember that in those days none of the Malpans had sufficient knowledge of modern European languages like English, French or German, and so could not get first-hand knowledge of current theological developments in the western countries. What they could gather and transfer to their disciples were theological ideas from the classic Syriac sources and the local languages. There existed few theological or spiritual books of good standard in Malayalam or even in Tamil in those days.

Coming specifically to the question of the origin and development of social vision in the mind of young Chavara, we may therefore surmise that mostly it might have been received from the vision of Malpan himself through his constant contact with him for several years and his own reflections on the contemporary condition of the Kerala society.

### **Malpan's Vision**

Malpan Thomas Palackal was one of the most erudite priests in the Syrian Catholic community then. He was quite knowledgeable about theology, liturgy etc. and was proficient in languages like Syriac, Tamil and probably Latin. Besides he was also a man of great vision about the future of the Kerala Church. We may surmise that he had two strong convictions – one, the Kerala society and particularly the Kerala Catholic

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<sup>1</sup> Chavara Achan, *Punyacharithanaya Palackal Thoma Malpan* (Mal.), Janatha Services, Thevara, pp. 14-15.

community needs radical transformation in order to progress and become a modern and enlightened society, and two, the kind of leadership that existed in the Church then was not be capable of leading the Catholic community as well as the general society to higher levels of development; the priests who were in charge of parishes had only shallow knowledge in theological and secular subjects. So, he ardently desired to start a specially dedicated group of religious priests who could provide more efficient leadership in this area. Probably he developed this vision through his contacts with missionary religious priests like the Jesuits and Carmelites who had come from abroad and were working in Kerala then. He believed that only such a group of dedicated and learned men would enlighten and empower the society to higher levels of integral development.

Thus, the idea of founding a religious congregation in the model of the Order of St. Dominic (Order of Preachers) sprouted first in the mind of Malpan Thomas Palackal even while Chavara was doing his theological studies under him.<sup>2</sup> We understand that the Guru shared this vision and desire with his favourite disciple Kuriakose during his studies. The idea of founding a religious congregation had been experimented in the past in the Syrian community; its lifestyle had been more contemplative than active. We have historical evidence of such an attempt at Edappally where a contemplative religious community had been formed and also lived for a few years

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<sup>2</sup> A. Mathias Mundadan CMI, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara* (Revised Second Edition), Dharmaram Publications, No. 459, Bangalore, 2020, p.69

before it was discontinued. Almost simultaneous with the idea of Fr. Palackal, another priest, Malpan Thomas Porukkara, planned to start a group of persons leading eremitical life. We read in CMI history that Fr. Porukkara along with Jacob Kanianthara, a friend and protégé, tried to start a sort of contemplative religious life in a remote place or wilderness.<sup>3</sup> However, this idea of a secluded life was discouraged by the bishop himself, who encouraged more active and service oriented life from persons like Palackal, Porukkara and Chavara who were considered to be the most capable and knowledgeable priest-leaders. This shift in the concept of religious life was very well suited to the original idea of Malpan Palackal who envisaged a Dominican style religious congregation. So, the question is: while persons like Porukkara and Kanianthara planned to lead a secluded life with the firm conviction that salvation of souls was almost impossible in this corrupt and corrupting world, what might have inspired Frs. Palackal and Chavara to plan for the Dominican style of religious life. Here lies the roots of Chavara's (as well as his Guru Malpan Palackal's) social vision. While the former concentrated on the salvation of one's own soul through secluded and withdrawn life in contact with God through contemplation and prayer, the latter had in mind the salvation or holistic development of the entire society or the establishment of the Kingdom of God by enlightening and spiritually empowering the people. This difference in focus or orientation originated not merely due to the theological vision they held about the Church and its role in the society, but also the socio-cultural condition of the 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70, 75

century Kerala society. This double formative background – social and theological - requires more explanation. First, about the social background.

### **Kerala in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

As we know, the founding fathers of the CMI congregation lived, did different ministries and founded a religious congregation during the first half of the nineteenth century. It would be useful to have a short description of the social and cultural condition of the Kerala society of those times in order to see why these visionaries wanted to start a religious congregation in the Dominican model. The Dominicans were quite well-known for going around preaching and teaching the people, particularly the Christian community, about genuine Christian life. They were known for enlightening the people on Christian life and empowering them to lead such a life. That is why they are known as the Order of Preachers (OP). In the eyes of Frs Palackal and Chavara, this was exactly what the new group of religious priests should do and also what the Christian community in Kerala needed then. Why?

The Kerala society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by two serious and widespread social evils – ignorance and casteism. Both had serious negative impact on the society. Due to widespread illiteracy, people were ignorant of even the most fundamental realities of life and consequently the society was steeped in and beset with superstitious practices in most aspects of life. Education in the modern sense of the term was practically nil in this part of the country. According to the sources available today, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the elementary

education that existed in all the three geographical units of the present Kerala, Travancore, Cochin and Malabar, was characterized by the following: a) It was not at all organized, and was undertaken by *kudipallikudams*<sup>4</sup> run by traditional teachers (*âsan*, *ezhuthachan*, *vadhyar*), and, being unorganized it was not the State or community, but the parents of the children, who took the responsibility to send the children to these teachers. b) It was most elementary consisting of just learning to read and write, to do basic arithmetic and to grasp the fundamental tenets of religion. The few so called centres of higher learning, known as *vedapatasalas* and *sabhamatts*, imparted chiefly higher levels of religious education and more knowledge of poetry, drama, grammar, martial arts etc. Even the skill of writing was not given as much importance as reading, and the students were trained to recite from memory. (It may be noted that in ancient times there existed special persons to write down what was necessary for household or social records and the so called learned people used only to dictate to these 'writers', rather than writing by themselves). c) Apart from the basic skills of reading and writing, mostly it was religious education, teaching the children the fundamentals of religious values so that they become adapted and obedient to them rather than developing their creative intellect. d) And,

<sup>4</sup> The word, *palli*, is probably derived from the Buddhist background referring to their gathering for prayer and meditation. It is historically established that Kerala had influences of Buddhist presence during Sangam era. Places of learning might have existed attached to such centres in ancient times. Later the word began to be used about all learning centres, and the Christians adopted the term to refer to their gathering for worship, i.e., the church.



above all, education was limited to the male children of the upper caste groups. The women of upper caste families might have been given some elementary skills in reading at home. But both men and women of lower castes were not only denied education but their access to education was even regarded as a taboo.

Education began to get organized and also spread in Kerala only after the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Dutch and the Portuguese who arrived in Kerala before the British seem to have had little interest in spreading literacy and education in the State; <sup>5</sup> we have no evidence of any effort from their part. Though they established seminaries for the education of prospective priests, the 'schools' they started "seem to have been (imparting) essentially catechism classes".<sup>6</sup> So their contribution to mass literacy is open to doubt. Though the literacy rate among the Brahmins and Nairs might have been rather high towards the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century, the mass literacy efforts were initiated only at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the missionaries under the British government began to arrive in Travancore and Cochin. By 1806, the London Missionary Society (LMS) started missionary work in Nagarcoil (then part of Travancore) and established a school there in 1816. The Church Mission Society (CMS) started a seminary in Kottayam in 1820 and a school in 1821. Schools for female

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<sup>5</sup> P.K.Michael Tharakan, 'Socio-Economic Factors in Educational Development, Case of Nineteenth Century Travancore', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XIX, No. 45, Nov. 10, 1984, p. 1916.

<sup>6</sup> H. Hosten, 'Peter Louis SJ or the First Indian Jesuit', in *Kerala Society Papers*, Series 2, 1928, p. 45-47.

education were also started by the wives of the missionaries as early as in 1818 in Kottayam and in 1819 in Nagercoil.<sup>7</sup> The Travancore Government helped the missionaries in promoting education; the now widely known Monro Thuruth was given by the government of Travancore to the missionaries to defray the expenses of the school.<sup>8</sup> Other high schools were also established by the missionaries in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century itself at Neyyoor, Santapuram and Parasala in the South and Mavelikkara and Alleppey in the North.<sup>9</sup> Besides, a number of primary schools were established by the above mentioned two missionary societies all over Kerala. Thus, the LMS established 175 schools and the CMS, 47 schools in the 19<sup>th</sup> century itself.<sup>10</sup> Though there was a heavy emphasis on religious subjects in these schools, the missionaries did not neglect to give the students secular education also; hence subjects like literature, language, geography, arithmetic etc. were also taught. In these schools, the first four classes were taught in Malayalam but in the higher classes English was also taught. In order to train the necessary number of teachers, the CMS started a training school at Mavelikkara in as early as 1857.

In spite of such initiatives from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the vast majority of the people were still steeped in illiteracy. For, the newly started educational institutions were

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<sup>7</sup> Tharakan, p. 1920.

<sup>8</sup> Rfr. P. Bhaskaranunni, *Pathompatham Nootandile Keralam (Mal.) (Kerala in 19<sup>th</sup> Century)*, Kerala Sahaitya Academy, Trichur, 1988, p. 1062.

<sup>9</sup> Tharakan, p. 1920.

<sup>10</sup> V. Nagam Aiya, *Report on the Census of Travancore*, 1881, Govt. Press, Trivandrum, 1884, Ch. IV, pp. 149-151, quoted by Tharakan, p. 1917.

mostly of very small size and also few for the fast growing population. Besides, compared to the foreign protestant missionaries, the local Catholic Church entered the field of education only much later; the foreign prelates who ruled the Catholics discouraged English education among them for fear of Protestant influence. The illiterate and uneducated population obviously did not develop a rational and scientific temper and was immersed in superstitious beliefs and practices. An important expression of such a superstitious mindset was the widespread practice of caste discriminations in all communities, including the Christian. The cruel discriminatory practices affected and tortured almost all aspects of the lives of the lower castes – the language they were allowed to use, the food they could eat, the dress and ornaments they were permitted to wear and the mode of wearing them, the houses or huts they could construct, their mode of journey from one place to another, and the occupation or job they were destined to engage in. The rigid caste system did not allow any social mobility and one who was born into a particular caste or sub-caste was destined to live according to centuries-old caste rules till his/her death. He or she was not permitted to change his occupation or mode of living. Even the religious beliefs and practices, especially among the Hindus, were practiced differently in each caste group. Each of them had different gods, different temples or places of worship in which others could not enter and different modes of worship. Thus everything in life was believed to be static and eternally determined by destiny on the basis of *karma*. Moreover, due to the practice of untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability between

various castes and sub-castes, social interaction among the people was confined to the narrow boundaries of the caste group. The society was divided and subdivided into numerous groups without any meaningful contacts. It was after seeing the wide web of such caste discriminations and taboos that Swami Vivekananda called the Kerala society of those times a lunatic asylum. Yes, it was truly a dark age in Kerala.

Regarding the society that we described above, Chavara notes that the Kerala society was totally infertile (*matchi* in Malayalam), incapable of producing any good.<sup>11</sup> A letter from the founding fathers to the bishop points out this fact in the following words: “A lot of good had not been done due to the absence of a *Thapasu Bhavanam* and a *Darsana Veedu*”.<sup>12</sup> If one looks back to the Kerala society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one will realize that the absence of good works which the founding fathers wrote about had been due to the stagnant nature of the society. The stagnation arose on account of the rigidity of the caste system that had complete grip on the society, not only of the Hindu society, but of the whole society. Caste prevailed over the society and predetermined the whole life of the human being, and ignorance and absence of rational outlook prevented them from doing anything to change the situation. The whole society was resigned to the status quo which their karma and fate had determined for them from the past.

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<sup>11</sup> ‘*Macchi*’ is an old Malayalam word of Dravidian origin meaning infertile; in modern Malayalam, word ‘*Vandhya*’ coming from Sanskrit roots is used.

<sup>12</sup> Mundadan, *Ibid.*, p. 74

So, the main challenge before St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara and his mentors, who later became his confreres, Fr. Thomas Palakkal and Fr. Thomas Porukkara, in the nineteenth century in Kerala was to transform this infertile or barren (*macchi*) society into a fertile one with abundant fruits in all fields of life through their good works. It is in selecting the kind of 'good works' and the manner of doing them, we discover the unique kind of creativity or innovativeness in them, particularly in St. Chavara.

### **Shaping of Social Vision**

Seeing and experiencing such dark effects of ignorance and casteism in social life, it was quite natural for the very intelligent and imaginative persons like Malpan Thomas Palackal and his disciple Kuriakose Chavara to feel inadequate in their conventional priestly ministry. It may be recalled that even the priests, unlike Malpan Palackal and a few like him, were also rather uneducated in theological and secular subjects and lived quite content with performing the sacred rituals in the church. The Malpan knew well that these priests would not be able to provide leadership to change the society. That is how he began to dream about starting a religious community of priests like the religious priests who came to India from western countries. He hoped that these priests who would be more educated and committed as a group would give more efficient leadership in working for the advancement of the society.

The Malpan shared this vision with his disciples, particularly with St. Chavara, his favourite disciple, during

the latter's priestly training. That is why Chavara offered the desire for starting a religious congregation as the most important intention at his first Holy Mass.<sup>13</sup> As soon as the founding fathers got permission from the bishop to found a monastery, Chavara along with his mentors began to earnestly try for the same. Thus within two years after his ordination, the first monastery was founded at Mannanam in 1831. From here the small group of the first indigenous religious community began to take steps to change the Kerala society, not merely necessitated by the needs of the times but also inspired by the theological vision of their mentor Malpan Thomas Palackal, i.e., to enlighten and empower the people to build the kingdom of God among them.

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<sup>13</sup> Fr. Valerian C D, *Visudha Chavara Kuriakose Eliasachan, Malankara Sabhamathavinte Oru Veera Santhanam*, (Mal.), Biography, Dharmaram Publications, No. 457, Revised Fifth Edition, 2020, p. 49.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Social Transformation a Spiritual Mission for Chavara: Spirituality of Social Apostolate**

It was noted above that Chavara's social vision was shaped by twin influences - his observation of the society beset with several social evils, in which he lived and the theological vision about Christian life and the role of the Christians (Church) in the society, which he developed over the years through study and experience. It is this second aspect of his vision that made him feel more deeply uncomfortable in the status quo and hence ardently desire for integral social transformation.

#### **CMI Vision of Social Involvement**

The CMI Constitution says: "God is in reality experienced by people in the concreteness of their daily lives, their needs and aspirations, and their actual fellowship as brothers and sisters, children of the same Father. Like Christ, we too are sent into this real world to preach the Good News to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and liberty to the oppressed (Lk. 4:18). Hence, action for justice and participation in the transformation of the world is a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel (C77 a). Thus, the CMI vision considers social apostolate as an essential and integral aspect of God-experience. In other words, the CMIs are reminded that God is experienced through social involvement for making the lives of other human beings better.

The Constitution of Vatican II, *Church in the Modern World*, very clearly says the same in different words: “(Though) earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ’s kingdom, nevertheless, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the kingdom of God. For after we have obeyed the Lord, and in His Spirit nurtured on earth the values of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom, we will find them again, but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured. This will be so when Christ hands over to the Father a kingdom eternal and universal – a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace” (GS No. 39).

In the light of such theological views of the present times, it may be asked, what might have been the theological or spiritual perspective of Chavara almost two centuries ago about the role of the Church and the Christians in the world. Or what was the theological foundation or rationale of St. Chavara’s varied pioneering works in the social field? Was he merely a social reformer as the term is now understood and used by modern speakers and writers? Or did he have a deeper spiritual reason for his unprecedented involvement in the society?

### **A Functional View**

Some years ago, I felt quite strange and even squirmed in my seat, when I heard someone speaking in public that the founding of the religious Congregation for women by St. Chavara might have been motivated by his sympathetic affection towards his



own widowed mother (just because the first member of that Congregation happened to be a widow?). Was not the establishment of the first religious congregation for women the result of a persistent desire to found a community of intense God-experience for them and service to humanity arising from that God-experience, particularly to women, similar to those that existed in Europe and to the one he himself created for men? Was a religious congregation just a haven for widows and helpless women in the mind of Chavara? Was it a kind of mere social service for him? Still stranger was another explanation I heard about his filial devotion to the Blessed Mother. Was he sublimating his love towards his own mother by transposing it to the Blessed Mother? What a strange and secular imputation on someone who imbibed the great Catholic spiritual tradition of devotion to the Blessed Mother and tried to practice it faithfully throughout his life!

Persons are often assessed in the light of the functions they perform in the society. St. Chavara seems to have been judged by several modern writers and speakers in this manner. This may be called a functional approach in measuring personalities. But functional approach can be misleading. One and the same function can be carried out from quite different perspectives or motives, and the value of the function changes according to the vision. Compare the manifold services carried out for the betterment of the poor by the unbelievers like the members of the communist party and the religious sisters of charity under the leadership of St. Mother Theresa. The tasks may look similar or even identical, but they are carried out with quite different values or motives. For one it may be a

merely humanitarian service but for the other, a worshipful service to God, seeing the suffering face of Jesus in human beings.

So, one has to go beyond the level of functions, deeper into the personality of the performer from where the motivation or vision originates. Jesus once asked his disciples what others thought about him (Mt. 16:13). They responded saying that some considered him John the Baptist, some others Elias or one of the prophets and so on. Then he asked pointedly what they thought about him. It was then Peter replied that he was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. While the perspectives of the people were based on the functions Jesus performed during his public life, the answer of Peter was based on an intuition about the core personality of Jesus. Likewise, we need to see the inner personality of people like St Chavara in order to understand the true value of their doings.

### **A Deeper Vision**

St. Chavara was a person endowed with an extraordinary measure of charisma and consequent creativeness. We believe that God is the creator of the whole universe. Creativity is a unique divine characteristic. God has shared this characteristic of creativeness with human beings, not much with other creatures as far as we know. So, all human beings, are endowed with creativeness, of course in varying degrees and capability. While the other creatures have some capability to adapt themselves to the physical and social environment, human beings have the ability not only to adapt themselves to the surroundings, but also to apply their intelligence or creative

mind and re-create this world. This creativity is activated by their interaction with other creative intellects, and manifests in manifold ways in different spheres of life. Thus, creativity is triggered through contact with other minds like human groups and their life situations and/or with God Himself who is the supreme creative mind. In the case of Chavara and his colleagues, they decided to activate their creativity primarily in contact with God through prayer and also with other human beings. That is why they abandoned the idea of withdrawing from the world and, on the advice of the bishop, decided to start a monastery.

The activated creative mind manifests itself in various spheres of life. So, we find creativity and innovation in literature, art, culture etc and probably most visibly in modern times, in the fast advancement of science and technology. It is the creative intelligence of human beings that has transformed the world throughout human history, especially from the time of modern age. The same creative mind is manifested in spirituality also. In the case of the Christian charismatic personalities, the multidimensional personality of Christ is meditated upon by them and many of them draw newer and newer insights from the person of Christ due to their creative mind as well as the influence of the social situation in which they happen to live. Thus, for example, we may say that St. Ignatius of Loyola was attracted by the prophet-teacher personality of Jesus, St. Francis of Assisi by the poor and self-emptying Jesus, St. Don Bosco by Jesus the friend of the youth, and so on. Similarly, St Chavara living in the above-described social conditions of Kerala was inspired by Jesus who enlightened and empowered the people

of his times not only through instructions and teachings, but also through miracles of healing and deliverance, and tried to transform the world into the kingdom of God. Chavara was convinced that through the mission for the social transformation that he was embarking on, he was actually building up the kingdom of God in his place and time. He also felt that he had a responsibility to continue this mission of Jesus in his country in order to enlighten and empower his people and help them move forward to more united and enlightened society that reflected the qualities of the kingdom of God envisaged by Jesus, even after his times. So, he planned to start a band of followers as a religious congregation. But, before describing, however, how this social mission became, in his Christian vision, an essential aspect of bringing about the kingdom of God, we need to elaborate a little more how the noted spiritual charisma or creativity became a socially transformative power through the person of St. Chavara.

### **From God-experience to Social Involvement**

Chavara and his colleagues, we know, were excellent parish priests who were already doing commendable service to the society through their parishes. Still, they felt something lacking in themselves and in the society at large. That was an intense and intimate God-experience as a community of leaders and the consequent energization of the lives of the people for their transformation. So they eagerly wanted to activate their creative energy through personal relationship with God in a community. Chavara wanted to nurture that relationship through prayer and contemplation even withdrawing from the hustles of the world along with his colleagues and mentors. That was why

they called the abode they wanted to build a *Tapasubhavanam*.<sup>14</sup> They hoped that they would experience God in prayer and contemplation there and the spiritual energy that emanates from their *Tapas* (literally *Tapas* is that which heats up or energizes) would energize themselves and the Kerala Church. It was a real thirst for God-experience; yes, they were all men of God seeking holiness through relationship with God. This spiritual energy they wanted to channel to the society to transform it as part of building up the Kingdom.

That was how various kinds of services became in their hands manifestations and vehicles of God's enlivening love for humanity. So, as I see it, none of them was primarily a social reformer or pioneer in social development. They happened to be so, when the spiritual power originating from God and flowing through them rained on this world and transformed it. Being human channels with creativeness and imagination, they let that power transform various aspects of human life that needed growth. The Church in Kerala and the society grew by leaps and bounds imbibing the energizing nectar from the CMI founding fathers. Thus, both in prayer and action, they were first and last men of spirituality thirsting for God-experience and holiness and for channelling the spiritual energy for the growth of the people. It is said of Mother Theresa that she once declared: "We are not social workers; we are contemplatives in the heart of the world". She proceeded to explain that whenever she and her sisters did the so-called social works or services they were not actually doing social work as

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<sup>14</sup> Fr. Valerian C D, *Visudha Kuriakose Eliasachan*, pp. 50-51

the world understood it, but ministering to God through the service for humanity, and hence they were actually contemplating the face of Jesus seen in the sick and the afflicted, the desolate and the dying. Holiness is the result of our connectedness with God in contemplation as well as in action. St. Chavara has been holy – yes, heroically holy – because it was his God-experience that was manifested both in his prayer and manifold services to the society. He was just carrying God’s transforming and reforming power to humanity. Yes, the founder of the CMI Congregation was not just a social reformer like the others of that ilk. When we not only recognize it but also proudly proclaim even to the non-believers, then only his holiness will begin to be recognized by the society, along with the official recognition from the Church.

### **Humanization for Kingdom of God**

As we noted above, God created us human beings bestowing on us a spark of his own divine creativity and empowering us with his spirit (Gn. 2:7) in order to look after the whole earth (Gn.2: 15) so that we go on re-creating what is given to us. He created us also in his image (Gn. 1:27) so that his light shines and his will radiates through us in the whole world. Jesus, the Son of God, came to this world as the Light of the world (Jn. 9:5; 12:46), a true light that enlightens everyone (Jn. 1:9); so, those who were in darkness saw a great light (Mt. 4:16). And he told us, his disciples, that we are also the light of the world (Mt. 5:14) and let our light shine before others (Mt. 5:16). So, St. Paul added that God “has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus

Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). Hence our Lord commanded his disciples and through them all of us to go and proclaim the good news to the whole creation, and teach all nations what he commanded us (Mk.16:15; Mt. 28:20). Thus the Word of God teaches us that God wants all human beings, his children, and Jesus wants us, his disciples, to enlighten the whole world with the divine light and empower it with the divine spirit so that it is transformed into God's Kingdom in the fullness of time.

Drawing our attention to this most important responsibility of all the disciples of Jesus, the CMI Constitutions of later years state that "Christ praying on the mountain and proclaiming God's kingdom to the multitudes, identifying himself with the poor and always obeying the will of the Father is the supreme model according to which we have to form ourselves and also help the new members accepted into our community attain God-realization (*iswaranubhava*) through continuous transformation into Christ, the true Teacher (*sadguru*).<sup>15</sup> *Veritatis Gaudium*, the Apostolic Constitution on ecclesiastical education says the same in the following words: "The joy of truth expresses the restlessness of the human heart until it encounters and dwells within God's Light, and shares that Light with all people.<sup>16</sup> For truth is not an abstract idea, but is Jesus himself, the Word of God, in whom is the Life that is the Light of man (cf. Jn 1:4), the Son of God who is also the Son of Man. He alone, 'in revealing the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals humanity to itself and brings to

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<sup>15</sup> CMI Constitutions, C 79)

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Augustine, *Conf.* X, 23.33; I, 1, 1.

light its very high calling".<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, the Church demands that the consecrated persons receive spiritual, intellectual, communitarian and apostolic formation so that they can be effective witness to Jesus and his Gospel in the modern times.<sup>18</sup>

As if possessing this vision almost two centuries back, the bishop at the time of the beginning of the CMI Congregation was reluctant to allow the founding fathers of the congregation to lead a life of seclusion and solitude, as they desired in the beginning, fearing that that there would be less leaders to teach and guide the people. The chronicle written by St. Chavara notes: "They (the two founding fathers) told him (the bishop): "We have decided to live a quiet life in solitude, so we are seeking permission for the same and we shall find another suitable person as secretary for you here." The bishop replied: "If you two who are sufficiently learned enter into silence in a secluded place, who else would teach the people. But, however, if you so desire, then establish a convent (monastery) that would be beneficial for all..." We agreed with the proposal'.<sup>19</sup>

As soon as the first fathers came together and began to live as a community of prayer, study and mission, their new way of life began to enlighten and empower themselves with the word of God which they easily translated into concrete guidelines for their own life and that of the people. We may

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<sup>17</sup> Pastoral Constitution on Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 22; VG No. 1

<sup>18</sup> Address of Pope Francis to the Union of Superiors General on 29.11.2013

<sup>19</sup> Chavara's Chronicle, p. 6, 7



believe that they meditated on the person and mission of Jesus in the context of the then Kerala society. In the midst of the all-enveloping darkness of ignorance and superstitions on the one side and the weakening divisions and subdivisions of the society on the other, what touched and inspired them most, it seems, was the person of Jesus praying on the mountain and proclaiming God's kingdom to the multitudes, as the CMI Constitutions later noted. Hence, they responded enthusiastically to the call to 'continuously transform themselves into Christ, the true Teacher'.<sup>20</sup> In other words, they began to enlighten and empower the Kerala society that was dark and weak, through manifold ministries, which became the charism of the CMI Congregation. Since the founding fathers, and particularly St. Chavara, was a man with an extraordinary measure of charisma, he was capable of taking initiatives to start several ministries for transforming the Kerala society into a genuine Kingdom of God.

### **Enlightening and Empowering for the Kingdom**

At the beginning of this section, it was noted that God created us with a spark of his divinity in us. The chief characteristics of this divine spark or image of God within us are the twin faculties of the human spirit – the ability to think creatively and act freely and responsibly, rooted in intelligence and will respectively. If these two faculties of human beings and the related qualities are nurtured to blossom and grow to their full potential, they will shine forth from our lives and activities,

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<sup>20</sup> Rfr. CMI Constitutions, C 79

making the well-known saintly saying a reality: 'glory of God is human being fully alive' (St. Ireneus). For this to happen, the society should become fully enlightened and empowered.

The kingdom of God, as the Gospels envisage, is a special lifestyle that Jesus wanted to bring about among his followers. The kingdom he proclaimed and began on earth is essentially a community marked with justice and peace; its foundation lies in the loving and wholesome, lively and vibrant relationships among the members of the society and towards God. Such relationships get established and flourish only when all human beings are accepted as equals and are free to think creatively and act responsibly, or in other words, only when the inner life of all grow abundantly. That is why Jesus claimed that he had come so that we "have life and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10). However, taking into account the fact that many were in fact denied to have life in abundance, Jesus declared that the Spirit of the Lord was given to him and God had anointed him 'to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord' (Lk 4: 18).

Human societies all over the world at all times had and still have many millions who are 'blind and lame' yearning for enlightenment and empowerment, and 'captives' longing for liberation. As we know, several kinds of inner blindness and powerlessness, and consequent oppression exist in all societies; we are familiar with the economic, social, political and cultural expressions of such a situation. But what we notice every day

is just the periphery, the outer manifestations. The core of blindness and powerlessness lies in the inability to think and act freely for oneself and get out of the conditioned thinking patterns imposed by powerful interest groups who benefit from and enjoy the status quo. In simple words, the foundations of the present oppressions and exploitations lie in the “culture of silence”<sup>21</sup> of the majority sustained by ignorance and fright.

If one studies the history of the Indian Church and most of the other developing countries, one would know that it is chiefly through the initiatives taken by the Church that people began to develop the ability to think creatively and act responsibly; thus the Church has been functioning as an instrument for the inner liberation and empowerment of several crores of people. For millions, acquisition of knowledge has widened their mental horizons; training in free thinking has empowered them. If the missionary involvement has been successful in this process in any part of the world, the seeds of a just society have already been sown there, even if not fully efficiently and effectively. And the kingdom has begun to sprout there, even if there are not many baptized Christians and ecclesiastical institutions.

And it is this service to the Gospel (the good news of a just society) that Chavara and his colleagues believed that they were called upon to do as the members of the new religious group. In other words, they tried, first and foremost, to become

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<sup>21</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Continuum, N.Y., 2005. The whole book is an analysis of various kinds of oppressions resulting in a culture of silence.

spiritually and religiously enlightened and empowered, and wanted to help others become so. In continuation of General Synaxis Resolutions No. 37, which called upon all members of the CMI Congregation 'to be good educators capable of imparting new vision and employing effective methods in the apostolate'<sup>22</sup>, and 'to foster our legacy and give leadership in theological education wherever we are called upon', the CMI Congregation tries to carry this legacy forward.

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<sup>22</sup> General Synaxis Resolutions, No. 33, 35

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Chavara's Social Ministries: Mission for Integral Transformation**

As already noted, Chavara was a charismatic person; I use the word, charisma, not in the popular sense spoken nowadays in the Catholic circles. 'Charisma' in social sciences means creativity, and is the source of liveliness, vibrancy and innovativeness. If charisma gets routinized into traditional or bureaucratic leadership, a society begins to decline in energy and slows down in forward movement. As we explained above, God has endowed all human beings with a spark of his own nature, the divinity. But, some of us are specially blessed by God with an extraordinary measure of creativity. They are called charismatic persons, and they change the human society and the world in a very perceptible manner, much more than most of us.

Charisma is activated through inter-personal relationships; it is the touch of personal relationship that awakens the human creativity. Often, we notice how artistes, literary persons, politicians and such other leaders contribute creatively, activated and energized by their relationship with other human beings around them. They draw their inspiration as well as energy from constant and ongoing contacts with other persons. However, some are more inclined to draw their energy or, say, get energized primarily from their intimate contact with God. Since these persons get imbued with divine/

spiritual energy and since they channel it to the world for its fertile growth, we call them saints. St. Chavara and his confreres decided to reach out to the various areas of social life in Kerala, and energize them through direct involvement empowered with spiritual power.

### **Spiritual Empowerment for Social Transformation**

Hence to call Chavara a mere social reformer is to see his life and contributions from a functional and superficial perspective, which would touch only the periphery of his personality. We have to see through and beyond the functions, right into the core of his personality with a third eye, through a sort of special insight rather than through measurable analysis. Of course, Chavara reformed and reconstructed the Kerala society, but chiefly through spiritual empowerment, which he garnered for himself and for the society through his constant and intimate relationship with God, and the channeling of the same into the various socio-cultural needs. For him, his pioneering steps were not merely for social reconstruction, but more importantly for the building of a society that can be truly called the kingdom of God in the fullness of time.

Being a religious leader, Chavara's primary target was his own community. Through spiritually empowered social involvement, Chavara primarily targeted the Syrian Catholic community; the beneficiaries of all his services were primarily the members of this community, which will be evident from what we describe below. However, it is equally important that the benefits were not confined to that community alone. Their impact radiated beyond the boundaries of the community and

gradually influenced others as well. The Syrian Catholic community became a model and source inspiration to others on how to get organized and become creative in the different spheres of life. If one looks into the life and activities of most reformers, one would find that each of them focused on the most vulnerable and marginalized section of the society, with which each of them was familiar, and tried to reform that particular section. But its effects were not limited to that section, but influenced in most cases the whole society. Thus we find that Mannath Padmanabhan focused on the reform of the Nair community in Kerala, Sree Narayan Guru the Ezhava group, Ayyankali the Pulaya caste, V. T. Bhatathiripad the Namboothiris and so on. Still, their reformative impact went beyond the limits of the respective group or caste and positively affected the whole Kerala society. Almost the same was the case of St. Chavara. His reforming efforts led to the beginning of the rebirth of the whole Kerala society, beginning with his own community; the movement he initiated has been carried forward by several other leaders who came after him and the people themselves, so much so that the Kerala society has been transformed for good, beyond recognition during the last one and a half centuries.

## **Pioneering Steps for Transformation**

### **(1) Vision of God as Father of All**

We already indicated that the barrenness of the Kerala society which Chavara noticed was the effect of two major factors - the irrational fragmentation of the society into numerous castes and subcastes then and the widespread ignorance of the people,

the former being probably more serious. Under the stifling control of the caste system, no one was capable of even looking beyond, leave alone reaching out and relating to others beyond, one's small circle of caste or sub-caste group. As already noted, the caste rules did not allow free social mobility or even physical mobility. Each individual born into a particular caste or subcaste was condemned to live within its narrow confines observing social restrictions regarding practically all aspects of life. The Kerala society was immobile within the cage of a steely and rigid caste system. While the whole of India practiced untouchability, the Keralites extended the discrimination to unapproachability and an unimaginable practice of unseeability. Even the Christians practiced such discriminations with other religious groups and among themselves. Due to such fragmentation, the society was never live or vibrant. It did not have what we call today synergy that should sprout from unity and strong interpersonal relationships. A divided society incapable of interacting and working together could not garner enough moral and social stamina to produce any good.

Probably, the most important reason for the strong adherence to superstitious discriminations of caste practices and the inability of the people to forge wide unity was a defective vision of God, reinforced by ignorance arising from illiteracy. None, not even the Christians, had an authentic vision of God as taught by Jesus. Each caste and religious group had its own petit gods and goddesses; based on that belief, they had their own distinct religious practices that kept them separate and distant from each other rather than closer and together. No caste group, including the Christians who lived



like a caste within the caste hierarchy prevalent in the society, allowed others to have access to their reserved religious domain. Each group remained content within its narrow self-made ghetto and its reigning deity.

Here, we may recall that probably the unique contribution of Jesus to the religious world was the teaching that God is the universal father of all - Jew or gentile, Pharisee or publican, saint or sinner, man or woman. While the Old Testament, like the history of many ethnic groups or tribes, presents before us a tribal God who cares only for his people, but not the gentiles, and who protects only those who obey him but abandons the disobedient, the picture of God Jesus gave us was totally different and even revolutionary. Probably we have lost sense of its revolutionary nature since we have moved much forward and repeatedly heard the same many times. In a society filled with sectarian gods, Jesus' was a radically new teaching. It totally departed from the picture of a partisan God, and presented to the human society a God who unconditionally loves all, even those who do not love him. But, the Kerala Christians were not, it seems, familiar with this New Testament vision of God. We may recall that the NT was translated into the local language only towards the middle of the nineteenth century for the Protestants (1842) and in the twentieth century for the Catholics (1935). Though the liturgy celebrated the total self-giving of Jesus for all in sacramental symbols and gestures, the whole religious ambience the liturgical prayers created was that of the OT, because they had been originally written from such a perspective for the sake of the Christians converted from Judaism. I do not know if anyone

has noticed that not even once the Syro-Malabar liturgical prayers address God as Father (except in the prayer, 'Our Father'), even though that is the most endearing term Jesus had been using to address God. Besides, during Chavara's times, liturgy was celebrated in the unintelligible Syriac language. And the regular Sunday homily, through which some adult catechesis could have taken place, was introduced only from the time of St. Chavara by some of the early CMI fathers! Above all these, we are not sure how far the priests of those times, except a few like St. Chavara, were sufficiently knowledgeable in theology and capable of educating the people.

It was in this context that St. Chavara repeatedly addressed God as Father and presented Him so to the people. The most prominent imagery in his meditative soliloquies and devotional literary works like *Atmanuthapam* is that of God the Father. In all places, Chavara uses the most endearing Malayalam colloquial word, *Appan*, not the formal term, *Pithavu*. That resonates the Abba consciousness of Jesus himself. Chavara conceived God not merely as his personal father, but the father of all. He was convinced that God is the father of all human beings irrespective of their religious or social status and community affiliation. That made him see the humanity as one unified social entity, the family of God. That was a very creative farsightedness he developed much before other social reformers ever began to conceive humanity as one integral whole, one family of God. Chavara's inspiration definitely came from Jesus' own vision of humanity which he, through his meditations and prayers, tried to own for himself. Of course, he could not completely convince his people about the same and eradicate

the social divisions and discriminations that had been existing for centuries, but could embrace all people into his love and concern, and invite them to a life more human and united. From here begins his efforts to change the life of the people through education and other charitable programmes for social uplift.

Though St. Chavara had an inclusive and universal vision of humanity, it seems, our people then and even now have not risen to that level. Divisive tendencies and discriminations continue to exist and seem to grow day by day in our society even in these modern times. Almost daily we come across incidents of intolerance and even of attack of one religious group by another, one caste by another, one gender group by the other and so on. Hence, today as it was at the time of St. Chavara and like him we have to not only embrace the whole human society as one, but also inculcate this value or vision of one humanity in the young generation. Fostering of inter-religious harmony, universal vision of humanity and even of the whole world including all living beings, acceptance of all human beings particularly women and the dalits as equals etc are some of the practical applications of this attitude. It is a huge challenge, a very difficult challenge before us, but if we fail and the divisive forces succeed, we are going to lose our country, the unified nation, for which the founding fathers sweated day and night and even shed blood.

Not long ago, Pope Francis told the religious that theirs was a prophetic duty, i.e., to wake up the world. The world or the human society loses its energy and vibrancy, and becomes

dormant, even infertile – to borrow the Chavara terminology. The religious must awaken and energize it. For this, the attention of the world, or at least of a section of it, must be drawn to the source of energy – God’s invitation to recreate the world as He wants it, i.e., in justice and charity. In the cacophony of the manifold invitations the modern society extends, nobody listens to this unless it is presented in powerful life-witnessing. We have to live what we preach. Let us bear witness to the truth that all humans are truly brothers and sisters by embracing all sections not only in our pious sentiments but also in actual life and ministry, just as Chavara did.

## **(2) Towards a Dynamic Vision of Society**

The second factor that blocked any progress in the Kerala society was, as I already said, the irrational attitudes and practices, then prevalent among the people. The basis of such practices was the strong hold of traditionality and the inability of the people to conceive the society as a dynamic entity due to the widespread ignorance prevalent then. Social thinkers consider the era up to the time of the industrial revolution in 18<sup>th</sup> century as a period entrenched in a static vision of society. According to this vision, the world does not and cannot change. It exists eternally just as God created it. Under this conviction, all traditional practices, even those rooted in morally and socially untenable perception of man, were justified, and even minor changes were forbidden. This vision had its expressions in almost all spheres of life – in the geocentric static view about the universe (the immovable earth as the centre of the universe), the non-evolutionary creationist view about life (evolution was

heresy), the monocratic and monarchic view about politics (in which some were eternally predestined by God to rule), the merely cyclic and agriculture-centred economics, the philosophical concept of God as the unmoved mover who exists far from the human beings unconcerned about their life and who looks at us only if and when we invoke him, the social perception that all traditional practices including the abhorrent caste discriminations were divinely ordained for perpetuity, and so on. It was the European enlightenment and the consequent spread of rationality that helped the people to see the world and the human society as dynamic, as capable of progress. The industrial revolution itself was the result of the human effort to apply rationality and change the world according to human needs. Instead of adapting oneself to the world just like the animals, the human being began to innovate and adapt his surrounding as he wanted. Though this dynamic vision began to manifest in heliocentrism, theory of evolution, wider introduction of democracy in politics, industrialization, and the historical (genuinely biblical) view of God's salvation as a holistic and progressive realization of fullness of life, gradual rejection of pre-ordained social discriminations, and so on, it had not yet percolated to the Kerala society even at the time of Chavara; this society remained rather isolated from the changes elsewhere. Even the missionaries who worked among the Keralites, hailing from the traditional and conservative Portugal and Italy, did not become a link to the progressive world, but rather maintained the static vision and perpetuated their hold on us. This is manifested not only in their opposition to indigenous administration but even in their

retrograde attitude about education; unlike the Protestants, they never created a single opening for education, but rather raised hurdles like danger of Protestantism, government-controlled secular education etc. for fear of change.

In this dark and suffocating situation shines the glittering creativity of Chavara who looked at the human society from a dynamic perspective and initiated a revolution for social mobility through education. He strongly believed that education was the only tool for creating an enlightened and dynamic society. From this conviction begin his manifold efforts in different fields to enlighten and empower the people around him. So, we might call St. Chavara a link with the dynamic western society, a *Sandhana Purushan*, i.e., person who linked our society with the European dynamism.

### **(3) Priestly Formation for Leadership in Social Transformation**

Realizing the importance and unique role of well-educated priests, especially in those days, in forming an enlightened Christian community, the founding fathers of the new religious community started as early as 1833 a seminary at Mannanam after the model of the seminaries in the western countries. This was the very first concrete initiative they took with a view to enlighten the people theologically and spiritually. As already noted, there existed no seminary among the Syrian Catholics in Kerala. (There was one for the Latins). The Syrian Catholics continued to get trained for priesthood under the Malpans who conducted the gurukul model training centres in a few places. Chavara himself, as we mentioned, was the disciple of Malpan

Thomas Palackal at Palliupuram along with a few other students. Though these *malpanates* provided very good character formation and training in devotional life, the priests who were trained in such places had only very elementary theological knowledge and no secular education at all. The chief reasons were: the teachers or the Malpans themselves were not highly educated theologians, they did not have knowledge of modern languages to get access to the current developments in the theological studies, only one teacher educated the group in all subjects, and above all good theological literature was not available in local language. So the founding fathers felt that the priests themselves should be well educated in a western model seminary so that they become well equipped to educate the people in the parishes. A western model seminary in which the academic training was systematically organized, and where several teachers lived together and exchanged ideas and a large collection of books and other literary sources were kept for the use of the trainees in a library was their dream. They were convinced that such a seminary alone can provide systematic modern type of theological education to the future priests. So, within just two years after the establishment of the first monastery, they started a modern type seminary at Mannanam in 1833 chiefly under the inspiration and initiative of Malpan Thomas Palackal. It is noted in history that Malpan Thomas Porukkara was initially not very enthusiastic about the idea since he feared that a seminary with a group of youngsters would disturb the silent and prayerful atmosphere of a monastery, which he had visualized from the beginning as an

abode of prayer and contemplation.<sup>23</sup> Still, he later accepted the idea and also became its first rector. And this seminary was not merely for the future candidates of the newly founded religious congregation, but also for the seminarians of the whole diocese or all parishes of the Syrian Church. Thus, the enlightening and empowering initiative was started with the leaders of the Christian community itself.

This shows their concern for grooming a sufficiently knowledgeable Christian community in the Kerala Church. We can be legitimately proud of the fact that this Mannanam seminary which functioned as the common study house for the seminarians of the diocese as well as of the religious community, became the mother of all future seminaries in the Syro Malabar community; initially it branched off to Puthenpally and later to Mangalapuzha for the diocesan seminarians and to Chethipuzha and Bengaluru for the CMI community. Today, Mannanam can proudly claim to be the mother of more than a dozen major seminaries for the religious congregations and dioceses of the Syro Malabar community spread over different parts of India.

#### **(4) Revolutionary Attempt in Secular Education**

As mentioned already, there was little formal and systematic secular education in Kerala till the beginning of the nineteenth century. Only from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Protestant missionaries introduced formal education in Kerala,

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<sup>23</sup> A. Mathias Mundadan CMI, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, op. cit., p. 92



but its fruits, especially knowledge of English language, were reaped chiefly by some sections of non-Catholic Christians as well as the lower sections of the society, who flocked to the missionary schools in large numbers. Some of them became Christians and were absorbed into the lower rungs of government bureaucracy, which was an added attraction for going to schools. They gained knowledge, social mobility and employment in the growing political and economic fields, which changed their life for good. Seeing the benefits of formal education, the governments of those days also opened several schools which benefited the upper castes of the Hindu community. These initiatives were praiseworthy in themselves, but Chavara saw two major drawbacks in these attempts: one, it did not benefit all, but only some sections, and two, the efforts still kept the society divided. On the one hand, the upper caste Hindus did not benefit from English education since they considered the language as *mlecha* (taboo, polluting) and were also not ready to sit along with the lower groups. It did not benefit the Catholics either, since they were discouraged by their ecclesiastical authorities from attending missionary schools and learning English for fear of falling into Protestantism on the one side, and the government schools on the other, which did not provide religious instruction along with the secular. Moreover, it was not a system of education for all people together, but for different sections in different manners.

So, Chavara experimented with his own unique brand of education, a very creative but unbelievable step in the 19<sup>th</sup>

century. Hoping that Sanskrit, one of the most ancient languages of the world rich with literature, would open the world of knowledge for his people, if they were forbidden to learn English, he opened a Sanskrit school in 1846. Imagine, in those days of arch conservatism, a Christian priest opening the doors of Sanskrit, the divine language of Gods according to Hindu belief, permissible to be used only by the upper caste Hindus, to all irrespective of caste considerations. What was it, if not a creative and revolutionary step?

Later, soon after he was appointed the Vicar General of the Verapoly Archdiocese (1861), Chavara implemented the well-known directive to start schools attached to every church (1864). His own monasteries took the initiative for the same. And these schools were open to all, i.e., for the upper and lower castes, for the Christians as well as the Hindus. He is said to have introduced a noon-meal scheme in schools to attract and support the children from the lower sections of the society. Later he opened at Koonammavu a school for girls' education also and entrusted it to the newly established religious congregation for women (1868), at a time when women were denied formal education. In spite of such a bold and creative step from Chavara's part, I do not know how many of his own people, i.e., the Syrian Catholics themselves, allowed the lower castes to sit along with them and receive equal education. There are evidences that the caste bias of the Syrian Christians lasted many more years, even after the death of this pioneering revolutionary. Even so, it was an initiative, only a man with charisma could visualize and implement. It was truly an

initiative for universal education including all sections of the society, much before any government in India could visualize such a step.

There are now some who argue that this pioneering movement for starting schools attached to parishes was initiated by Bernardine Baccinelli, the Archbishop of Verapoly, not by Chavara. Whether the famous circular regarding schools came from the archbishop or Chavara, the then Vicar General for the Syrian Catholic community (I am told by the canonists that the VGs are competent to send circulars for specific purposes if they are entrusted with a responsibility, while the pastoral letter is reserved to the bishop), the inspiration and implementation, I am almost sure, came from Chavara. For, history tells us that the foreign bishops were disinterested in education for fear of the reasons already mentioned, while Chavara displayed a keen interest in the same from the time of opening the Sanskrit school. As the former Central Minister for Human Resources Development Kapil Sibal put it, the education policy of the Indian Government may be summarized in three key words: expansion, inclusion and excellence. If these are the key characteristics of the modern education policy of a government of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Chavara's education policy of almost two centuries back contained expansion (horizontal spread of education to all parts of the society, through schools attached to all churches) and inclusion (vertical spread of education to all layers of the society, by letting all, including lower castes and women, have access to education) from the beginning. At a time when literacy itself was a mark of excellence, what more

should anyone do then to enhance the third feature of education? One need not have, but Chavara did. Envisaging holistic education, he called upon the parents through his well-known booklet, *Oru Nalla Appante Chavarul* (Testament of a Loving Father), to provide value formation to their children in the families since the family is first school of formation and the schools in those days were not sufficiently equipped to provide such formation. (The contents of the booklet *Oru Nalla Appante Chavarul* will be analyzed in detail below).

With the spread of education, Chavara believed, the society would become enlightened and free itself from the irrational and abhorrent practices. Once the discriminating and dividing practices disappear under the glaring light of education, and the people are cured of the blinding ignorance, Chavara hoped, a unified society would eventually be shaped. It is this vision as well as the mission he undertook to implement the vision that makes Chavara stand tall in the social horizon as a charismatic (creative) leader of social transformation. And, as I already mentioned, he did dare to take such an initiative, because unlike the other leaders of those days, Chavara could visualize the whole society as one, as one family of God. That is why I noted in the beginning that saints activate their charisma, drawing spiritual energy from God through prayer and contemplation.

### **(5) Value Formation for Holistic Education**

It was noted above that Chavara wrote the booklet *Oru Nalla Appante Chavarul* (Last Testament of a Loving Father) for the

sake of value education and character formation of the children in the family. This, he hoped, would make education holistic and complete along with the knowledge the youngsters obtain from schools. The book contains Chavara's vision and practical guidelines for personality formation based on his vision of a disciplined society. It contains unique insights into the theology of family life, for enlightening and instructing the people to lead a spiritually and morally upright family life and also to bring up the children in the Christian way of life. It remains a set of very useful guidelines for family even after almost one and a half centuries. Among the forty practical guidelines given, twenty-four are about leading an ideal Christian family and the rest about bringing up the children. Before giving the guidelines or along with them, Chavara paints his vision of an ideal Christian family also. Of course, the booklet contains also some guidelines which might have been useful in his times, but have become rather impractical over the years due to the fast changes in the society.

As we noted above, one of the motivating visions of Chavara that made him get involved in the society for its transformation was his conviction about the role of the Church in the society, i.e. to bring about the kingdom of God, the ideal human society that accepts God as the Father of all and other human beings as brothers and sisters. So, the most important and fundamental idea of family in the mind of Chavara was that it is a miniature foretaste of the kingdom of God. Hence, he says at the very beginning of his Testament: "A good

Christian family is like heaven".<sup>24</sup> We know that the family at the most basic level is an institution developed by human beings with the help of the bonding in blood and love. But when the will of God is realized there, true peace (Shalom) is expected to prevail like in heaven. Jesus once asked a group of listeners, who his brothers and sisters were. He himself answered the question, saying that those who did the will of the Father were his brothers, sisters, mother and so on (Mt. 12: 46-50). Jesus was envisaging a family beyond the one developed on blood relation and bond of love. When human beings do the will of God, they all become His children and hence brothers and sisters. Yes, they become members of God's family. Chavara repeats this idea and envisions such families in his society.

In order that peace (Shalom) prevails in families, he advises all to forgive the mistakes of others, reminding that only human beings have this unique ability to forgive just because we alone share the divine qualities from God, while retaliation arises from our animal nature and threatens the very existence of the family, as Jesus himself indicated (Mt. 12:25). In these words, he envisages a social order based on spiritual ideals. He instructs as well as encourages people to rise above their animal nature and human abilities to a still higher divine level.

The same spiritual vision can be seen in his view about the role of children in the family. According to Chavara,

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<sup>24</sup> Chavara Kuriakose Eliasachan, *Oru Nalla Appante Chavarul* (Mal.), (The Last Testament of a Loving Father), 25<sup>th</sup> edition, Mannanam, 1964, p. 5

children are God's gift to parents.<sup>25</sup> In the modern times, when reproductive technology has advanced and the couple are capable of deciding on the time and number of children, and many tend to think of generating children as the utilization of reproductive technology according to each one's convenience and for their satisfaction, Chavara is presenting before the parents again a higher vision that the children are born not merely due to your ability or decision, but are gifts of God, whom the parents should protect and nurture.

Still further Chavara is asking all members of all families to do at least one good deed everyday, so that goodness grows and blossoms in human society and it slowly and gradually gets transformed into the kingdom of God. In order to nurture goodness in human society, Chavara further gives a number of practical guidelines, for example, how celebrations should be controlled in order that we do not fall into financial difficulties, put a stop to gossip and undue interference in others' affairs, lead frugal and disciplined life by repairing and using those things which we can, instead of falling into the trap of a throw away culture, do manual labour, profit in any kind of business should be only decent and within permissible limits, choose friends with prudence and discernment so that no one falls into the trap of wrong influence, give just wage to the workers, develop a realistic self-assessment and accept what we cannot change, never allow ourselves to be influenced by misleading books, and have a disciplined and organized life so that we succeed in life. All these show the kind of society

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18, 'Bringing up Children', No. 1..

Chavara envisaged and wanted to develop. It was truly a social vision based on and inspired by the Christian concept of the kingdom of God, and he wanted it to begin from each family, as the family is conceived as the most basic unit of the Church.

### **(6) Preaching for Theological and Spiritual Education**

It was indicated in the beginning that Malpan Thomas Palackal wanted to start a religious congregation of men in the model of the Order of Preachers, since he wanted such a group to go around in Kerala and educate the people theologically and spiritually. Naturally, the inspiration to enlighten and empower the people of God persuaded them from the beginning itself to take up the pastoral responsibility of preaching the Word of God, which, of course, took different forms like retreat preaching, Sunday homilies, catechumenates and so on, none of which ever existed in the Kerala Church till then. We should remember that the Catholic community in Kerala did not have any kind of systematic religious education in those days, as it has today. Nor did it have any means to acquire such knowledge from other sources, since the people in Kerala were mostly illiterate or just marginally literate. In the absence of printing technology, the church or the society could not provide even the basic materials for reading and acquiring knowledge. The scarce manuscripts that existed here and there, whether of religious or secular information, were not accessible to the public, except perhaps to a few privileged. So oral communication was the only effective means to spread knowledge of any kind. That was why the few informal schools



that existed then relied on just this method for the transmission of knowledge (*ôthaï*). Our founders used this method of oral transmission of knowledge profusely for the benefit of the people.

Along with retreat preaching, they also introduced several other innovations to spiritually enlighten our ancestors. Chavara himself took the initiative to start homilies during Holy Mass on every Sunday, encouraged the priests to start pious associations for the people to come together and not only pray in groups, but also learn about Christian life and discuss its practical aspects, initiated devotions like forty hours' adoration and similar pious activities, some of which he copied from the Latin tradition.

### **(7) Spread of Knowledge through Print Media**

Another attempt from the part of Chavara with the same objective, i.e., spread of information and eradication of ignorance was the beginning of the print media at Mannanam. During the time of Chavara, there existed only two printing presses in Kerala, one in Thiruvananthapuram with the government of Travancore and another with the CMS missionaries at Kottayam. Chavara wanted to see a model of the press and make one for the Catholic community. But he did not get access to the one at Kottayam. So he travelled all the way to Thiruvananthapuram, saw the press, prepared a model on the tender stem of a plantain tree and made a wooden press with the help of a carpenter, and began to print and

publish books, chiefly spiritual or devotional types. As a continuation of this extraordinary initiative, Mannanam press not only published thousands of books, both spiritual and secular, but also became the centre to start the first newspaper in Malayalam, first called *Nazrani Deepika*, and later *Deepika*.

This pioneering step in communication media through the Christian community, gave a sure edge in this field to the Kerala, which can now boast of very high level of readership of books and other print materials. It indicates the impact of the small seed that Chavara sowed and the CMI fathers nurtured about two centuries ago.

### **(8) Empowerment through Unity**

Not only did Chavara try to enlighten the Kerala society, he took the initial steps to empower it also, which the later generations of Kerala took up and led to its greater realization. Apart from the caste divisions in the society as a whole, the Christian community itself was divided into several subgroups of various churches and denominations, and was being threatened to be divided again due to external pressures. The Catholic community which had already been reduced in number and size from the time of the Coon Cross Oath of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was threatened during the time of St. Chavara with another division due to the entry of a Chaldean bishop; St. Chavara had to run the length and breadth of Kerala to rescue the Catholic community from the infamous Roccas Schism. Even though Bp Roccas hailed from the Catholic side

in Persia, Chavara was convinced that in the given circumstances of the Latin bishops ruling the community, it was almost impossible to be an independent Syrian Church, but would lead to further division only. So he worked hard and succeeded in sending back the Chaldean bishop. At the same time, convinced that disunity and discontentment against the Latin rule has weakened the Christian community and its chief reason was the absence of native ecclesiastical leadership who could understand the aspirations of the community, the first fathers relentlessly tried on the one hand to protect the community from further division and on the other to obtain permission for a local bishop in order to strengthen it and keep it united. The efforts of the founding fathers, especially of St. Chavara and his successors, in bringing back the separated brethren into reunion also point toward their desire for building up the community. Though these efforts did not produce immediate result during Chavara's lifetime, the continued works of his successors bore fruit by the first half of the twentieth century and brought about at least partial unity among the Christians of St. Thomas with the reunion of a section of the Jacobite community to the Catholic Church as Syro Malankara Church.

The establishment of the first indigenous religious congregation for women in cooperation with Fr. Leopold Beccaro and the starting of an *Educandat* (School) under the supervision of the first convent were unprecedented steps for the empowerment of women. In a society that had never recognized unmarried women living away from home, the very

idea of a convent where women alone live in prayer and community life was an unimaginably novel endeavour. Secondly, at a time when women were not allowed to go out of home either for education or for work, the attempt to teach the girls the basics of knowledge and train them for jobs was also a pioneering step for women's empowerment.

The empowerment and enlightenment of the Syro Malabar community has benefited not only itself, but even the Latin church in India. The starting of religious life in the community and the fast growth of priestly and religious vocations in it through the efforts Chavara and his successors took has helped the Latin church in India also. Thousands of members of this community have over the years joined the Latin dioceses and religious congregations to serve the Indian church, going beyond the boundaries of their ritual church.

Thus, from the life and activities of the CMI founders we may surmise that they considered the enlightenment and empowerment of the general society and particularly the Christian community as their special responsibility or charism. They utilized their spiritual energy flowing from their God-experience as the chief resource of power for such a ministry. The subsequent history of the CMI Congregation of almost two centuries reveals that the fathers of the Congregation were engaged in manifold ministries like education, preaching, publication etc. for maintaining this legacy and providing the much wanted leadership in bringing about the needed transformation of the society in the following years. Today,

through hundreds of churches, chapels, schools, colleges, cultural centres, self-help groups etc. the Congregation is still continuing the same twin ministry of enlightening and empowering throughout India and abroad.

The desire for empowerment of the community can be seen also in the establishment of home of charity, *Upavisala*, in 1869 by Chavara in his own native place, Kainakari. The sick and the aged, especially from the financially weaker sections of the community, usually do not get sufficient support from family or the society. Realizing that a community becomes really strong only when its weakest members are protected and taken care of and they feel supported physically, psychologically and socially, Chavara entrusted the running of the *Upavisala* to his own parishioners, a model of lay participation in apostolate.

Today, the Catholic Church in India is well known for its widespread charitable activities like hospitals, orphanages, children's homes, home for the aged and so on. The impetus for such charitable services that the members of the Church draw from the Gospel values has been translated into indigenous models and nurtured by such examples, which Chavara showed almost two centuries ago.

Soon after the Portuguese bishops took over the administration of Syrian community after the Synod of Diamper, they had organized the community into a diocese with parishes like in the Latin Church. In the pre-Diamper

days, the local churches in the community were almost autonomous and did not have any kind of hierarchical organization. The bishops who came from Persia were just spiritual leaders and the temporal administration and social organization were carried out by a local leader called Archdeacon with the support of *Yogam*, assembly of prominent lay persons at the regional and ecclesial levels. The autonomy of the parishes and absence of a statutory organization under a bishop made the community rather weak in getting united under a strong leadership. But the post-Diamper re-organization by the Latin bishops made the Syrian community much stronger as an organized group. This also helped Chavara in introducing innovations like school education, liturgical reform etc. in an organized manner and also in keeping the community more united in the face of threats like the above mentioned Roccas schism.

### **Need to be Enlightened and Empowered Today**

However, there is a widespread feeling in the CMI Congregation and also among the people in India that while the general society has progressed greatly during the past two centuries, the religious have not been able to rise to higher levels as expected by the people or at least to their satisfaction. Such a feeling in spite of the fact that the channels of ministries have grown in number, efficiency and variety and the CMI community is widely considered to be one of the most efficient organizers of pastoral and educational services points toward the need for growth at another level. The results of a survey conducted in

preparation for the GS 38 in 2020 indicated that the above mentioned feeling was not without foundation. About one third of the members who answered the survey thought that we should become more equipped to do retreat preaching, youth ministry etc. (31%, No. 41). The competence of our members in the field of imparting holistic education is sometimes found wanting and needs to be enhanced (35%, No. 64). Complementing the above perception, about 38% members felt that our study programmes did not equip our scholastics sufficiently for future ministry of the Word of God (No. 120) with sufficient spiritual commitment. Another significant observation was that our study houses imparted more organizational skills than spiritual and pastoral competence (No. 123). On the positive side, more than half of our members expect regular updating programmes on biblical and pastoral topics, Church documents, etc through study classes, seminars etc., so that our members become more enlightened (No. 134, 135). All these findings point toward not only to the need for creativity and innovation in knowledge and its application, but also to maintaining an enlightened spiritual core, as expected from a religious and priestly community, in utilizing the ability.

As we noted above, our founding fathers took the pioneering step to start a seminary in order to train an enlightened clergy for Kerala. They introduced a scheme of priestly formation and ecclesiastical education with creativity and innovativeness. That was a farsighted vision of education itself. Modern education, whether secular or religious, demands not mere accumulation of the knowledge developed and stored

in the past but also sufficient capability to innovatively utilize the acquired knowledge and even to create new knowledge.

In antiquity, there was nowhere people could store the treasure of knowledge except in their own memory. The memory of the teacher was the chief storehouse of knowledge, and as the teacher distributed a small portion of it to his pupils, the latter grasped it from his mouth (*Gurumukh*), retained it in his own memory and reproduced it whenever and whichever way it was demanded from him. Thus, grasping, retaining and reproducing became the key dynamics of intellectual development, which was chiefly a function of the memory. This method of education that existed in the small schools of ancient Kerala was used for transmitting religious knowledge in the *Malpanates* also.

Today, however, knowledge is literally on our fingertips. It is available universally – to all everywhere and at any time. That is the effect of knowledge revolution, which means that the creation of knowledge and its acquisition are no more the monopoly of a few privileged persons. Knowledge is being created very fast in modern times and can be picked up by any one at any place. Hence, keeping knowledge in memory has become less necessary. Moreover, if the creation of knowledge was the rare gift of a few at precious moments, today there is need to create and update knowledge constantly.

So, there has occurred a paradigm shift in education all over the world. Nurturing the capacity to create knowledge rather than the ability to acquire knowledge has become the



most important aspect of intellectual development. Though we need several types of infrastructure facilities to create knowledge, the most important equipment needed is creative intellect itself. Intellectual creativeness consists in the capacity for critical reflection – asking hitherto unasked questions and searching for answers. The chief characteristic of any kind of education should be the fostering of creativeness.



## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Church Teachings on Social Apostolate Beyond Chavara?**

The foundation of the theory as well as practice of social involvement from the part of the Church lies in her sense of responsibility to become the sacrament of God's gift of salvation in and through Jesus Christ to the whole world. As we know, the Church perceives itself as the continuation of Jesus' presence and ministry in the world unto the fullness of times. In this perspective, salvation is conceived as integral, i.e., of total human being and of all human beings; it is already in us and in our midst, yes, already, but not yet fully realized, reminding us the words of Jesus, 'the kingdom of God is 'at hand' i.e. already at the threshold. This kingdom is conceived as the family of all human beings who live in Shalom under the fatherhood of God, and it happens because God has given Himself to humanity as agape or unconditional love.

In the past, redemption was often conceived as mere salvation of souls into the other world, and the emphasis in this life was for the preparation for the eternal life in the world to come (as if it is a rehearsal time). In order to be elected for heavenly bliss, we were asked to practice virtues and become perfect as the 'heavenly father is perfect'. But today salvation is seen as the life in the kingdom of God, which includes this world also. Hence efforts for salvation cannot ignore the social life of human beings; salvation begins and is experienced first

in this world in the social and personal life of the humans. It is only in the life after death one experiences salvation beyond the social realm.

**Nature of Salvation:** God is experienced in many ways by different people – as Truth, as Mahatma Gandhi used to say, or Ultimate Reality and so on. However, one of the most beautiful experiences of God by human beings is that God is love; *Deus Caritas Est*. The Greek thinkers have spoken about different types of love: philia, eros, storge and agape. Eros, according to Pope Benedict (*Deus Caritas Est*), is ascending, gripping, demanding love; it is a love with passion. It arises from the need for fulfillment through union with the other. Such love is attributed to God only twice in Old Testament and not even once in New Testament. Agape, on the other hand, is descending, sharing and oblation love. It arises from fullness and finds bliss in sharing. Human beings, according to Christian perspective, experience God as Agape. God shares his fullness with human beings. In that sharing is man's well-being (salvation). The Kingdom of God that Jesus established and wanted us to nurture and bring to fulfillment is God's sharing of himself with human beings and the consequent well-being or shalom for the humans.

In order to establish this kingdom, the Word of God assumed flesh so that in and through Him all human beings share divinity; in the biblical language, this is the status of the adopted children we have been bestowed with. Hence respect towards and basic equality of all human beings is expected in the kingdom. In order that all experience equal love from God,

God shows preferential concern for the poor and the less privileged, i.e. those who do not have any other support but God (*anawim*). Social Apostolate is an integral part and continuation of Jesus' ministry to the less privileged: his reaching out to the poor, the sick and the marginalized through miracles, assuring presence and challenging actions were the sign as well as the reality of the imminent Kingdom of God as revealed in the Gospels. Hence the social apostolate of the Church is a source of special God-experience (Kingdom experience): 'God is in reality experienced by men in the concreteness of their daily lives, their needs and aspirations, and their actual fellowship as brothers and sisters, children of the same Father'.<sup>26</sup> This is the experience of God as Agape.

**History of God's Social Concern:** In the Old Testament, Exodus, a socio-political liberation of the people of Israel from the oppression in Egypt is presented as part of salvation. Later, the prophets called for liberation during the second exile as part of God's plan for the kingdom. The concept of Jubilee is seen in the Bible as a levelling off of the society and periodic establishment of equity, a foretaste of the kingdom of God. In the New Testament, we have numerous examples of Jesus showing special concern for the marginalized: table fellowship with sinners and publicans, healing miracles as signs of God's acceptance of the socially rejected. In several parables Jesus teaches that God loves all equally, even preferentially the underprivileged: parables of prodigal son, lost sheep, vineyard workers, pharisee and the publican, good Samaritan are good

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<sup>26</sup> CMI Constitutions, C 77 (a)

examples of such teachings. Some symbolic actions by Jesus crossing the threshold of social discrimination show his special concern for those who were on the other side of acceptance: table fellowship with the sinners and publicans, cleansing of the lepers rejected and discarded by the society, entering Zacheus' house normally a taboo for a Jew, entering the house of the centurion, a gentile, a polluting act for a Jew, drinking water from the Samaritan woman etc. His teaching on the observance of sabbath as less important than human welfare, the picture of God as one who lets the sun shine and rain fall on the good and the evil, love of enemy, liberation of the oppressed as the final proclamation of the kingdom etc also give the same message. Quoting prophet Isaiah, Jesus declared that his mandate was for liberating the oppressed; the same mandate was given to the disciples when he left this world (Lk. 24: 46 ff). He also empowered the disciples with the gift of the Holy Spirit for preaching his universal mission of the Kingdom of God, so that his mission of liberation continues till the full realization of the kingdom. The early Church established a style of life that broke the barriers of discriminations: Peter's dream of getting the command from above to eat all kinds of animals without considering the taboo of purity or pollution (Acts 10: 9-16), circumcision controversy and the final decision to accept the gentiles to the community without the Jewish ritual (Gal. 5: 2ff), lifestyle as one community and the common sharing of goods (Acts 4: 32 ff), teaching on the essential link between the Eucharist and shared meal among the members of the Church (1 Cor. 11:33) etc. are some examples from the early Church.

**Special Concern of the Consecrated Persons:** Religious life, as we know, is the closer or more intimate following of Christ in the model of the early Church. The religious are considered to be more mature and more capable of sharing everything with others as Christ did, much more than the ordinary Christians. The three vows help them grow into the full maturity of Christ who, in order to do the will of the Father (obedience) emptied himself (poverty) and made himself available to all (chastity). So, the life of the religious is the most shining example of how all aspects of life, personal as well as social, contribute together to build the kingdom of God Jesus envisaged. In this model, there are no distinctions between spiritual and social aspects of life; all aspects are involved in building up a genuine family of God.

**Social Apostolate Is the Offering of Salvation:** Kingdom, salvation or integral well-being includes the well-being of human beings' social and temporal existence also apart from his spiritual or supernatural well-being. Human beings who grow in temporal well-being experience or must experience the process of attaining that well-being as God's love for the humans. Thus, social apostolate becomes an integral dimension of salvific love offered by God and experienced by human beings. In other words, Christian life is a response to a call from God to enter into a communion of love with Him. Call is received through revelation; response is our faith and consequent commitment to his call. Faith is not mere acceptance of certain truths, but collective surrender to God in love. Hence faith has two expressions: celebration of communion with God

in liturgy and celebration of communion in charity. So, charity began to be practiced by the church from early times for the physical and social well-being of the humans, and began to be perceived as an essential dimension of the Kingdom of God, a must for those who work for the Kingdom in underdeveloped communities. However, we have also to bear in mind that since social apostolate aims at the integral development of the human being, it should not be perceived as restricted to mere economic development either.

### **Changing Social Situations and Theological Visions:**

When we consider the integral well-being of the humans, it is equally important to note how this well-being can or should be achieved. The vision about the method of its attainment has undergone changes in human history according to the changing vision of society itself. In the static vision of the world as well as human society that we mentioned above, little can be done with regard to social involvement for improving the human well-being, except doing some charity to lessen or alleviate the suffering of the underprivileged sections of society, as the Christian community began to practice from the very beginning. So, in ancient times, Christian social involvement was chiefly confined to charitable acts or social service, like almsgiving, care of the sick and so on.

From the Middle Ages and the period of enlightenment when human beings began to look at the world from a dynamic perspective, people began to realize that the world and human society are changing, and we can apply our God-given creative intelligence to change the world for the better. In this dynamic



vision of human society, the human beings are regarded as co-creators of the world along with God; that is, the world can be changed through human intervention. In order to achieve the expected development, we are called upon to continue the work of God's creation through developmental involvement in the world. Organized and systematic social works and related activities were considered as the chief modes of social involvement. As we have not yet found the limits of human creativity and it is assumed to be virtually infinite, we have not fathomed the horizons of progress we can achieve through the human creativity.

Further, on the realization that the above noted social change often takes place not very organically and smoothly, but through a dialectical process, social action for change was conceived as the obligation of all who desire social justice in the world. It was found that society has not been progressing or developing equally in all sections and the chief reason is the oppression of the weaker sections by the privileged sections for the latter's own vested interests. Hence it was felt that there was need for challenging the existing oppressive systems and changing them through the exercise of liberating power. From such struggle should arise a more equitable and just society. The intervention of God to liberate the people of Israel from the oppression of Pharaoh, and the call of Jesus himself for change in the style of the political and religious authoritative structures of his times were considered as examples of such dialectical method of social involvement. They were considered as models of social action for the establishment of the kingdom of God. The so-called Liberation Theology of the 1970's originated from such views.

## Church Teachings on Social Involvement

As noted above, the social involvement of the Christian community for integral salvation was very much limited to charitable acts for a very long period. There appears a long silence about any other kind of social involvement. However, based on the theological vision of integral salvation that began to rise later, the Church documents have lately emphasized the importance of total salvation God provides, which includes human well-being in this world for all and also the various methods to attain it. They also point toward the need for establishing justice in order to experience peace in the world. *Rerum Novarum*, *Mater et Magistra*, *Pacem in Terris*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Populorum Progressio*, Medellin Conference Documents from 1968 in Columbia etc. are some of the chief documents that deal with justice and liberation.

**Till ‘Rerum Novarum’:** Though the ministry of Jesus began as a counterculture movement calling for the total reorganization of the religious, economic and social structures that exploited the people for centuries, many of his disciples could not sustain that style for long. The Jerusalem community under the direct leadership of Peter remained a sect within the Judaic religion, even though its style of life based on sharing and equality might have been a small counter sign to the Roman and Judaic cultures, which the large sections of that society did not even notice. Even though the new lifestyle challenged the Roman culture on the strength of its new faith, it did not seem to pose any serious threat to it, and the Roman authorities succeeded in eliminating it systematically for centuries. In the social field, however, even a spiritual revolutionary like St. Paul

called for only the good treatment of the slaves, not the cessation of slavery. Later, as soon as the new religion was recognized by the Roman authorities, and Emperor Constantine gave it freedom of practice, it began to lose its counterculture nature, and gradually became an integral part of Roman culture even absorbing and christianizing most of it. During the Middle Ages, the Church became an indispensable part of the aristocracy itself in Europe, accepted and reinforced the social and economic hierarchy, and almost completely lost its counterculture nature. Later, even during the colonization of America, the Church was on the side of the colonizers, justifying slavery and even discussing whether the slaves were real persons. Feudalism seemed to justify the status quo, and the Church was always with the powers of the Christendom. Social involvement continued to be confined to just charity towards the poor.

Industrial revolution that started from the 18<sup>th</sup> century and progressed to the 19<sup>th</sup> and the decline of imperialism by the end of the same century brought about capitalism and economic liberalism. The initial nature of laissez-faire capitalism was very cruel and totally indifferent to the plights of the labouring classes. As a reaction, communist ideas that promised more freedom and better life for the workers began to spread in Europe with the publication of the 'Communist Manifesto' (1789-1848) by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Marx published *Das Capital* in 1867. Communist movement began to grow in different parts of Europe, and the 1<sup>st</sup> communist international took place in 1864, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> in 1889. When more and more poor and labouring classes appeared to move away from the

Church and join the communist movement, the Church for the first time seriously began to reflect on the seriousness of social involvement and social teaching.

**Rerum Novarum:** Till the spread of communism began to threaten the Church, the latter was content with doing a few charitable services for the welfare of the poor against the growing exploitation by the liberal capitalists and feudal lords. Gradually the Church leaders were forced to think about social justice for large sections of the people. The encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, published 1891 by Leo XIII, was the first response of the Church to the new types of social injustice growing with industrial growth; it addressed the utter poverty and helplessness of the workers of those times and their reasons. Some of the highlights of *Rerum Novarum* were the following: though it reiterated the teaching of the Church on private property against the new ideas of state ownership propagated by the communists, it insisted for the first time that private property should be used properly by its owners. However, *Rerum Novarum* was based on what we described above as the static view of the society; it taught that classes need not be hostile and everyone should be respected; classes should cooperate rather than fight against each other. For the poor to become better, the State should help, and if necessary, state should intervene; the workers should be given just wage; and workers have a right to form association and they may form one – a very bold statement in those days!<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Cfr. John Desrochers, *The Social Teaching of the Church*, Desrochers, Millers Road, Banagalore, 1982, pp. 58 ff, for a summary of ideas of *Rerum Novarum*.

**Quadragesimo Anno**, the encyclical letter published in the 40<sup>th</sup> year after *Rerum Novarum* by Pope Pius XII in 1931, accepted the fact that society is divided into classes and also that there are minorities and majorities. It repeated the teaching on the obligation of just wage, that the right ordering of the society is the responsibility of the state, and that the workers have right to form associations. Though socialist ideas were praised in principle, the pope seemed to reject it in practice out of the fear for its dangers.<sup>28</sup>

**Mater et Magistra**, the encyclical by Pope John XXIII in 1961, though affirms that though the goods of the world are for all, upholds the right to private enterprise. However, it also teaches that the state should regulate the running of private enterprises and ensure just remuneration for workers. The trade unions are recommended by the encyclical which also teaches that the availability of the basic goods for all precedes the right to property. It goes on to recommend also that in industrial enterprises there should be international cooperation, and finally concludes with a theological vision that social reconstruction is part of the building of the kingdom of God.<sup>29</sup>

**Pacem in Terris**, another encyclical by John XXIII himself in 1963, addressed all people of good will (not Catholics alone) and, as the Pope was respected all over the world, all people listened to the words of the Pope. Its main teachings were: peace can be achieved only through just order of the

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 80 ff

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 109 ff

society; all persons are equal; state is very important to ensure just order and we should aim at a world order. The encyclical concentrated more on achieving peace in the society by controlling conflicts among the nations.<sup>30</sup>

**Gaudium et Spes:** *The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* was promulgated by Vatican Council II (1962-65) in 1965. Its main teachings were also on the same line as the above-mentioned encyclicals of the Popes. It reiterated more forcefully that the socio-economic progress is important in the world as part of the building of the kingdom of God and as part of such a goal, all cultures should be developed and affirmed that in order to attain progress, socio-economic life should be just.<sup>31</sup>

**Populorum Progressio**, an encyclical by Pope Paul VI in 1967, was published two years after the conclusion of Vatican II. It went on to teach that the world should have integral development, this development should aim at more humane conditions for all, and emphasized that the right to use this earth's goods is more basic than the right to own them. It also reiterated that the development which we aim at should be achieved in solidarity with all, not in a sectarian manner for some particular groups or classes and that development is necessary for ending conflicts among groups and achieving lasting peace.<sup>32</sup> **Octogessimo Adveniens** by Paul VI himself in

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 125 ff

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 152 ff

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 177 ff

1971 in the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, not only emphasized all the points mentioned in the previous documents, but goes one step further and makes a distinction between various levels of expressions of socialism, calls for more just sharing of goods both at national and international levels and declares that in order to achieve social justice, sometimes political action through proper legislation is needed.<sup>33</sup>

**South American Bishops' Conference Declarations: Pueblo and Medellin Declarations (1968):** After the conclusion of Vatican II, among the various Bishops' Conferences that discussed about the implementation of the ideas of the Council, particularly of the Pastoral Constitution, *Church in the Modern World*, it was the Latin American Bishops' Conferences which came forward first with very progressive declarations and action plans for achieving justice in Latin America, a continent where socio-economic disparities and exploitations are rampant even today. They declared that the domination and dependence which they witness in the whole of Latin America should give way to liberation and self-reliance. They described the existing situation in Latin America as violent (silent oppression), but called for non-violent process to achieve justice. So, they declared an action plan through the so called Basic Christian Communities, in which conscientization about the situation should take place, the conscientized people should be brought together for communitarian resistance to the violent situation and finally the whole society should be re-organized for achieving the desired social justice.<sup>34</sup> *Justice in the World*

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 199 ff

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 231 ff

was the document of the Synod of Bishops of 1971. It reminded all that the Church had a duty to bring about justice in the world; God is liberator of the oppressed; Jesus proclaimed liberation; hence the Church should continue to proclaim and bring justice to the world. In continuation of these declarations, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, CBCI, also spoke about removing injustice from the Indian society and establishing justice. But the declaration was not strong enough to catch the attention of the world or of even India.<sup>35</sup>

*Caritas in Veritate*, an encyclical promulgated by Pope Benedict XVI in 2009 focuses on integral human development based on an analysis of the inseparable connection between love and truth. It was released on the eve of the G8 Summit held in L' Aquila, Italy, during the severe global recession principally caused by a crisis of moral values in the capitalist economy. *Caritas in Veritate* (CiV) looks with Christian faith at the complex problems of human development and challenges governments, corporate houses, politicians, public officials and individuals to evaluate their economic responsibilities in the light of love governed by truth. It challenges institutions and individuals to replace false ideologies and greed for the proper function of the global economy. The encyclical is inspired by St. Paul's saying: "Speaking the truth in love we are to grow up in every way into him who is the Head, into Christ" (Eph. 4:15). It has been said that "the most decisive point of departure of the encyclical is this: God is Love and God is Truth." This encyclical continues the reflection on the global dimension of

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 251 ff



the social problems of Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* (1967) and John Paul II's *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987). For, Pope Benedict is convinced that *Populorum Progressio* is "the *Rerum Novarum* of the present age," shedding light upon humanity's journey towards unity" (CiV No. 8). It still is very relevant today, in a world divided between people of wealth and people of hunger. There can be no peace when the inhuman situations of hunger, poverty and the lack of basic necessities afflict the majority of the population. *Populorum Progressio* is a call to global unity, to draw all people together, in every part of the world, to overcome the disunity and the basic inequalities in humankind. Pope Benedict offers us a fresh reading of *Populorum Progressio*, calling for reforms in the economic and social order to narrow the gap in the development of peoples. Inequalities in the world can no longer be tolerated: lasting global solutions are required urgently. Ethical values are essential to overcome the current global crisis and to promote real development of all peoples. The encyclical offers a message of hope to humanity, namely, that it is possible to transform the world and to progress in justice and love in the economic and social field, and move forward towards the realization of God's kingdom. Every economic decision, says the Pope, has moral consequences, and economic activity must be regulated by just laws enacted through the political process. *Caritas in Veritate* provides a rich understanding of the nature of integral social development, especially in context of globalization. Love in truth is the principal force behind true development. The entire social doctrine of the Church revolves around the principle, *caritas in veritate* (CiV No. 6). "The Church's social teaching is

the proclamation of the truth of Christ's love in society" (CiV No. 5). Truth and love are planted by God in the heart and mind of every person. "Only with love illumined by reason and faith is it possible to achieve goals of development endowed with humane and humanizing values."<sup>36</sup> If love is at the heart of the Church's social doctrine (CiV No. 2), Christianity of love without truth would degenerate into sentimentality and leave no place for God in the world (CiV No. 3,4). The integral human development of all peoples has need of truth.

The Pope explains the interplay between two key social concepts of the Church's social teaching, namely justice and the common good. He reminds us that justice is intrinsic to love - that is, justice is not divorced from, but presupposes, love. To desire the common good and to strive towards it is a requirement of justice and love. Love demands justice when it recognizes and respects the rights of people. But love goes beyond justice and completes it by the logic of giving and forgiving, because to love is to give (CiV No. 6)<sup>37</sup> and to keep giving. To love someone is to desire that person's good and to take steps to secure it. The great challenge before us in this global era is to direct all economic activity towards the pursuit of the common good, for which the political community must take particular responsibility. Markets do not operate in a moral vacuum. Without internal forms of solidarity and mutual trust, the market will not fulfill its proper economic function.

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<sup>36</sup> Benedict XVI, "General Audience," Wednesday, 8 July 2009.

<sup>37</sup> See also John Paul II, "Message for the 2002 World Day of Peace"; AAS 94 (2002), 132-40.

Economic systems have to rely upon a culture of trust and a commitment to the common good. The present crisis caused by speculative financial dealings, deceit, fraud and greed is a call to discuss and to shape a new vision for the future.

The encyclical responds to the crucial challenges of the modern times. It addresses issues of dehumanizing deprivation, food insecurity, violence, corruption, relativism, abortion, sterilization, euthanasia, *in vitro* fertilization, embryonic research, religious freedom, secularism, terrorism, fundamentalism, exploitation of non-renewable resources, sex tourism, exclusive reliance on technology and an inhuman humanism which denies God. Pope Benedict succinctly states that a morally responsible openness to life represents rich social and economic resources (CiV No. 44). The theme of gratuitousness runs right through the encyclical. *Caritas in Veritate* helps us to realize that society has no future if the experience of gift is lost. The human person is made for gift. Truth, which is itself a gift in the same way as love, is greater than we are (CiV No. 34). Truth and love are both gratuitous gifts of God given to each of us.<sup>38</sup> In our relationships in civil society, this principle of gratuitousness and gift as an expression of fraternity must find its place within the economic, social and political activities (CiV No. 36), the Pope challenges the different economic and political players to replace the logic of economics and politics with the logic of the unconditional gift - an economy of gratuitousness and fraternity which fosters

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<sup>38</sup> St. Augustine expounds this teaching in detail in his dialogue on free will (*de libero arbitrio*, 11,3 8ff). See footnote no. 88 of CiV.

solidarity and responsibility towards justice and common good. The logic of the market is 'giving in order to acquire'; the logic of the State is giving through duty; but the logic of gratuitousness and communion creates for us a society based on solidarity and social responsibility, a profound form of economic democracy (CiV No. 38).

This encyclical letter is meant for the whole world but has great relevance for Asia and in particular for India. *Caritas in Veritate* admits that economic growth in a country is weighed down by malfunctions and dramatic problems. As we know, poverty remains a real problem, especially in rural India. It is estimated that about 350-400 million are below the poverty line, 75% of them in the rural areas.<sup>39</sup> Aware of the scandal of glaring inequalities the Pope says: "Through the systemic increase of social inequality, both within a single country and between the populations of different countries (i.e., the massive increase in relative poverty), not only does social cohesion suffer, thereby placing democracy at risk, but so does also the economy, through the progressive erosion of 'social capital': the network of relationship of trust, dependability, and respect for rules, all of which are indispensable for any form of civil coexistence" (CiV. No. 32). There is "a pressing moral need for renewed solidarity, especially in relationships of the industrialized countries" (CiV. No. 49). In very clear terms the pope insists on a "large-scale redistribution of wealth on a worldwide scale.

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<sup>39</sup> Source: World Development Indicators database, April 2002.

The Pope underlines the responsibility of political authority to give direction to the process of economic globalization. In the climate of global recession, the Holy Father strongly asks for “a reform of the United Nations Organization and economic institutions and international finance, so that the concept of the family of nations can acquire real teeth” to arrive at a just political, juridical and economic order (CiV. No. 67). He highlights the direct link between poverty and unemployment and states that in many cases poverty results from a violation of the dignity of human work (CiV. No. 63). He also warns that the authentic development of people is affected by the link between claims of a “right to excess” within affluent societies “and the lack of food, drinkable water, basic instruction (education) and elementary health care in areas of the underdeveloped world and in the outskirts of large metropolitan centres” (CiV. No. 43).<sup>40</sup> Poor countries lack the economic means to gain access to existing sources of non-renewable energy and to finance research into new alternatives: the Pope urges the international community to find institutional means of regulating the exploitation of non-renewable resources of these poor countries. He also calls for worldwide redistribution of energy resources (CiV. No. 49). The encyclical expresses the hope that the international community and individual governments will succeed in countering harmful ways of treating the environment. The covenant between human beings and the environment should mirror the creative

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<sup>40</sup> When this happens the development of people is endangered. Cf. Benedict XVI, Message for the 2007 World Day of Peace, 13: AAS 99 (2007), pp. 781-2.

love of God, from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying (CiV. No. 50). Individuals in rich countries must change their lifestyles and irresponsible consumption, if the world's resources are to be protected. The problem of food insecurity needs to be addressed within a long-term perspective. It is imperative to cultivate a public conscience that considers food and access to water as universal rights of all human beings, without distinction or discrimination (CiV. No. 27).

The encyclical sends a powerful message of hope to humanity. The world economy certainly needs a person-centred ethics in order to function soundly. The principles of solidarity and subsidiarity in the service of the common good foster an authentic humanism. But only a humanism that is open to God can give us the strength to suffer in love for the common good and “bring about the development of the whole man and of all men”<sup>41</sup> founded on love and truth,<sup>42</sup> and thus build the kingdom of God.

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<sup>41</sup> Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 42: AAS 59 (1967). P. 278. See also Benedict XVI, *CiV*, footnote no. 159.

<sup>42</sup> The whole section on *Caritas in Veritate* is prepared with the help of an article published in *Vidyajyothi*, vol. 73, No. 9, September 2009, pp. 1-4

## **CHAPTER V**

### **A Comprehensive Social Vision?**

In the light of what has been described above as the various dimensions of social involvement in the Bible and Church teachings, let us take a look at what Chavara tried to do in his times even before such teachings did not exist, and see if the vision he had and which he began to implement paved the foundation of a comprehensive Christian social vision.

#### **Chavara's Social Involvement: A Critique**

It is often complained by the Catholic community that while the social reformers of Kerala are named, Chavara is not included among them, even when other reformers like Sree Narayana Guru, Chattambi Swamikal, Ayyankali and several others who were born much later than Chavara and served the Kerala society are recognized. Is it a deliberate marginalization or purposeful forgetfulness or is there any valid reason behind it. Having tried to explain in some detail the social vision and mission of St Chavara and also the social teachings of the Church in later years, let me try to evaluate what he envisaged and did.

Social Involvement for the sake of bringing about integral change with the aim of establishing God's kingdom or nurturing a fully humanized society takes different forms according to the nature of changing times and places. As I noted above, there was a time in the past when people generally believed that this world and the human society are static, not

liable to change significantly from what God is believed to have created in the beginning of history. Of course, it is also a mystery that this God-created world is not perfect; there is a great deal of suffering – physical, emotional, moral and so on. If the world is static and remains so, what little we can do to make the society better through social involvement is merely to alleviate the sufferings and maintain it as livable as possible. From a Christian perspective, such an involvement should be imbued with Gospel values, not out of anger, should aim at change in all, not in one or two sections or groups, and definitely methods should be peaceful, not violent, so that they do not create more suffering but on the other hand, Shalom.

Hence, probably the earliest kind of social involvement human beings, particularly Christians, initiated was practice of charity or social service, for personal and social relief. Thus developed the different ways of almsgiving, charity, aids etc. But this has been an unsatisfactory and passing solution to a lasting problem, since the effect is only temporary, partial and superficial. Social service aims at help in emergency only to tide over the situation. However, from the Christian point of view, social welfare activities manifest God's compassionate face to the poor, which Jesus himself showed throughout his lifetime through his healing ministry and dealings with the hungry and the needy.

We know that welfare activities are a necessity even in developed societies; they are occasions for God-experience, especially the compassion or kindness of God in human vulnerability. And they have great affinity with a static vision



of the society, i.e., the society does not change, and cannot change; God has created us so. So charity is a necessity always due to the fragility of human nature, and also of other living beings. Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, writes: 'Command for the love of neighbour (Mk.12: 31) exemplified through the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37) will always prove necessary to be obeyed, even in the most just society. There is no ordering of the society so just that it can totally eliminate the need for a service of love (DCE No. 28, b). The Pope continues to state that the service for the poor is the inevitable expression of our love of God: 'The Church cannot disregard humanitarian works for the love of the neighbour as she cannot abandon the sacraments and the proclamation of the Word of God' (DCE No.22). So, our social apostolate should begin with charity in the first place manifested through our sincere response to the people's immediate needs in specific situations: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for and healing the sick, visiting those in prison etc. Charity is all the more intensely manifested through our services in the so-called *frontier ministries*. In all these, we can also cooperate with other agencies and the public service system; with our transparent operation and faithfulness to the duty of witnessing to love, we can give a Christian quality to civil agencies that will redound to the effectiveness of charitable services.

We also saw that it was only from the end of the middle ages, that the world and the human society began to be conceived as dynamic. The enlightenment movement succeeded in showing that human rationality is creative and dynamic

and it grows and moves forward reaching out to higher and wider horizons of knowledge. In other words, human mind is not created merely for knowing eternal truths and accepting them in order to be adapted to them; God has bestowed it to the humans to create new knowledge. Along with this dynamic perception of human mind came the understanding that the whole universe itself is dynamic.

In order to organize social work for the integral development of the society, the people have to be mobilized making them aware of the need for development, self-help groups need to be formed to function as catalysts in the community, specific projects have to be conceived and designed according to the needs of each region, and resources for the implementation of the projects have to be raised and collected, and finally they should be executed with the cooperation of the people. It involves systematization of involvement, usually planned in advance with analysis of the situation and means of intervention. Social involvement for all-round development has a broader ambit; it penetrates deeper into the society to effect structural and even qualitative changes for a better society. Hence systematic social work through organizations established for the integral development of society is equally, if not more, important for the building up of the Kingdom community.

We do not have any evidence to show that Chavara came into contact with this vision that emerged in Europe. As already noted, the missionaries he met were mostly from Portugal and Spain, the countries that were least dynamic and

progressive. The famous writer and orator, Sri Sukumar Azhikode, once called St. Chavara '*Sandhanapurushan*', meaning that Chavara tried to link or join together two cultures, European and Indian. Probably, Azhikode meant that Chavara introduced the learning of European languages, seminary training etc in Kerala. Much more than that, Chavara somehow directly or indirectly imbibed the dynamic vision of the emerging Europe and introduced it in one of the most stagnant and static societies, Kerala, and tried to change it into a dynamic one. The unique tool he used for the purpose was education for enlightenment and empowerment. He believed that through education the doors of rational thinking would penetrate the society and it would shed ignorance and superstitions and gradually the society would grow into an enlightened one. Through enlightenment, the irrational attitudes of caste discriminations would disappear and the society would throw away the divisions and barriers of inter-caste relationships and become more unified and consequently empowered.

We are not sure how and from where the importance of education for nurturing a dynamic society originated in Chavara's mind. If it was not received through his contacts with the missionaries working in Kerala, I presume, it definitely arose from his own charismatic or creative personality. His contacts with the society around him and his own reflections on the state of the society in the light of the Word of God, especially the teachings of Jesus on the kingdom of God, helped him conceive that kingdom as a dynamic one and education as one of the most important tools for nurturing that dynamism.

So he laid the foundations for education and tried to spread it in his society as much and as fast as he could.

### **Creativity in Education Today**

Today, education, we know, is no more the mere spread of literacy. The creativity Chavara exhibited then needs to be translated into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by taking innovative steps necessary and appropriate for our times. I think, time has come to review our conventional idea of education itself. For a long time, education, though defined as the holistic development of the human personality, had primarily or predominantly been conceived as the accumulation of knowledge. There was a time when knowledge was not accessible to all. On the one hand, we did not have the means to store the knowledge except the human memory first, and then later the limited resources of the manuscript or print technology, and on the other hand, the access to this privileged treasury was limited in all societies to certain sections on the basis of caste, race or gender considerations. So, in those days, obtaining knowledge itself was considered a privilege. The youngsters from the privileged groups were sent to schools, where teachers picked up chosen bits of knowledge and passed on to the next generation. The latter on their part grasped and retained the knowledge received and later on reproduced them as demanded. That was called the triple dynamics of education – grasping, retaining and reproducing.

Today, however, the collection of knowledge is no more a difficult task. Knowledge is distributed all around the world in lightning speed due to the information technology revolution.

It is accessible to all everywhere; literally, it is on fingertips (that tap the keys of the internet connection). No restrictions exist at least in principle. One need not go even to an educational institution to acquire knowledge. It is no more stored solely in the memory of the teacher as in the past; the student need not learn from the *Gurumukh* either. So, the acquisition of knowledge is no more considered to be the primary objective of education.

There has occurred a paradigm shift in education. Today education is more the grooming of creative intelligence than collection of knowledge, which one can have at any time, as and when one needs it. The world no more waits for the appearance of rare, gifted persons like the old inventors and discoverers to create knowledge. It is being created as an ongoing process. Hence the development of creative intelligence is the need of the modern times. Creative intelligence is the ability to raise questions and untiringly search for answers, and also the ability to apply the acquired knowledge innovatively according to the needs of the varying times and contexts. The job-providers of the modern society select their prospective employees not on the basis of the quantum of knowledge acquired in schools and colleges, but of the degree of creativity they manifest in generating new knowledge and/or applying the same innovatively. So, education today is the training for creativity. That is what is meant by excellence in education in these days.

If St. Chavara creatively took the initiative to start schools to spread education and made it expansive and

inclusive for the benefit of all, today the ingenuity expected from us is the fine-tuning of the creativity of our youngsters to equip them for the modern society. And we should provide the opportunity for this growth not only to certain sections but to all as much as we can.

The grooming of creativeness is not merely a need of the modern times, but in it consists also the evangelizing role of education. We believe that God created the human beings in his image, and the spirit that is given to each of us is the imprint of His image. The chief characteristics of this image – the faculties of the spirit – are the ability to think creatively and act freely and responsibly. It is this image of God that is totally covered up in a majority; it is these faculties that are stifled in the millions, when they are forced to live at subhuman levels without the ability to think for themselves and act freely and responsibly. A society like ours in which millions, thus, have practically little opportunity for letting the image of God shine from their personality and have, therefore, lost the dignity as God's children, is certainly not the kingdom Jesus envisaged.

If one studies the history of the Indian Church, one will know that it is chiefly through education that the Church has been helping the people to develop the ability to think creatively and act responsibly; thus the Church has been functioning as an instrument for the inner liberation and empowerment of several crores of people. And the kingdom has begun to sprout there, even if there are not many baptized Christians and ecclesiastical institutions.

Besides the intellectual development, education, we know, also aims at the development of other aspects of the human personality - yes, the holistic development of the human person. From a Christian perspective, education is a service for developing the personality of the youngsters to the mature measure of Christ. But here also challenges are rising, and a paradigm shift is occurring. Many have started to treat education as a service industry, just like hotel industry or communication industry. Education is conceived as the product or commodity manufactured by the industry and the students, the consumers. They 'buy' the product in order to satisfy their needs. Since the needs vary in the society, education also must be produced with specialisation to meet the needs. In modern social life, the needs and the necessary skills to satisfy the needs are very specifically and narrowly defined and accordingly education, especially the advanced education, is moulded to suit the narrow areas of specialized skills one acquires to satisfy the needs. The school education is expected to lay the foundation for the future specialization and from here begins the competition to reach the top in order to be qualified for higher skills which shape a career and generate huge income.

A couple of the most important changes due to this shift in perception are worth noting. First, holistic education becomes rather irrelevant, because it is not the whole personality of the student that comes under formation, but some of his faculties that require development for needed skills. The whole education is thus geared to specialization rather than to total formation. Second, the teachers need not attend to the total personality of the students; they are so to say 'coaches' who fine-tune the

needed skills. They themselves need not have a respectable personality as in the past and be role models; they are expected to be professionals with the ability to impart the skills in their field of specialization. There arises a separation between life and profession. The teacher's life is seen as his/her private domain which need not be necessarily linked to his profession; professional excellence is evaluated rather a-morally. Since specialization and fine-tuning of the skills requires great investment and consequently the final product, i.e. education, is quite costly, only those who have purchasing power can buy the product. The poor and the marginalized cannot afford to get education. Besides, education being the end-product of an industry, those who are engaged in it have a 'right' for a profit from their investment. Thus, education gets transformed into business.

Among the skills a youngster must acquire to build up his/her career are an important set of the so-called soft skills. Some of the chief soft skills are transparency, authenticity, ability to reach out, positive attitude to life and development, ability to forgive and move forward, ability for teamwork, critical thinking and creativity, ability for problem solving, adaptability, communication skill, leadership and ability to influence others, time management and so on. Thus education, both basic and advanced, becomes a kind of grooming of the youngsters for the success in future career. Even though we may think that some of the soft skills are helpful for enhancing the positive dimensions of the personality, they seem to remain just functional in the periphery without shaping the inner core of the person. In other words, one grooms such skills only to



the extent he/she needs them for success; they do not seem to become the inseparable positive foundation of the personality.

This shift necessitates, I think, a re-thinking from our part. We may not be able to ward off completely the consequences of these changes. But we must sustain the benefits of the traditional vision of education, and also benefit from the modern vision too without succumbing to their negative impacts. In other words, how can we bring in the efficiency the modern vision demands, while maintaining the holistic and universal vision evolved through the collective wisdom of the past.

This is the challenge we face today, and the answer lies in imbibing the vision and inspiration of Chavara, and translating them according to the demands of our times through committed and concerted effort. It alone can equip us to become effective instruments in the hands of God for shaping the present society and its members for the needs of tomorrow.

### **Chavara's Experiments**

We know that Chavara started a Sanskrit school at Mannanam in 1846, probably because he could not start an English School due to the reluctance of the then Catholic bishops from foreign countries who had a bias against English language on account of its affinity with non-Catholics, particularly Anglicans and Protestants. So he might have thought that a school that taught one of the most ancient languages with an abundance of world-class literature might be beneficial to the society. But this was almost three decades after the first missionary schools began

functioning in Kerala and much after the awareness about education began to spread in the State; even so, that experiment failed soon. After the closure of the Sanskrit school, Chavara seems to have taken his next step only around 1864 when he took the initiative to start schools attached to each parish in the Catholic community, particularly in its Syrian section, of which he was the Vicar General then. Though St. Chavara tried to implement the scheme very enthusiastically, we are not quite sure whether he himself or the bishop was the source of the original circular on such a project. And we do not possess any record today that gives us the actual number of schools started under the scheme, the type of the schools and how long each school functioned. Probably they were elementary vernacular schools attached to most of the parishes and monasteries, and the training to read and write Malayalam and do arithmetic along with the teaching of religion and some other secondary subjects like geometry might have been imparted in these schools. As to the background of the pupils who attended the schools, we may surmise that due to the caste taboos prevalent then and the opposition to the teaching of Christianity, the upper castes might not have come to these schools; mostly they attracted the lower castes, for whom these schools functioned also as catechumenates. The children from the Syrian community might have attended some of these schools, but almost certainly in separate classes or at least separately within the class, since they were also practicing caste rules in those days. Similarly a couple of schools were also functioning under the auspices of the Latin dioceses or Latin Catholic priests from 1862.

The first formal school in the Syrian Catholic Community that continues to exist even today was established only in 1885, fourteen years after the death of Chavara; it is St. Ephrem's School, Mannanam. The first informal school for girls was started under the auspices of the Congregation of Mount Carmel (CMC Congregation) soon after its inception in 1866; but a formal school was established only 1920. This indicates how far behind the Catholics had been in education in the initial years, in spite of the much acclaimed initiative of St. Chavara. However, the story of education and the role of the Catholic Church from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are quite different and remarkable. We shall turn to that soon.

Going back to Chavara's times, still later, it was widely known that in spite of the practice of charity for millennia, and organized social involvement for several centuries, the human society was divided into classes of have's and have-not's. While the wealth of the earth is vastly accumulated in the hands of a small minority, the vast majority of the less privileged live in poverty in marginalized conditions. And this disparity in accumulation of wealth has happened due to unjust amassing of wealth by a few through the exercise of various types of power they had such as of caste status, fame and name, political power under the rulers of each period etc and consequently the rest became impoverished as they became helpless and powerless victims of power. The human society became stratified on the basis of wealth when a few instead of all shared the wealth unequally at the expense of the majority. This is called exploitation.

In such a situation organized social action for removing the oppressive structures becomes necessary in order to liberate the majority from exploitation. This is called social action. Only the removal of unjust structures will enable the society to establish just order for all members.

**Indian Scenario:** In the Indian society, the vast majority are traditionally low castes or outcastes, and they have been living under severe social restrictions on growth, education, occupation etc. They have been suffering from oppressive laws regarding travel, food, dwelling place, employment and so on. Several kinds of restriction on their women, their social interactions, purity and pollution etc. have been imposed on them. Along with the caste, class divisions were also joined together in most parts of the Indian society, making the stratification very steep and severe. The existed small section of upper class with huge wealth and huge section of low class with little wealth. Status of the minorities, particularly religious minorities was more pathetic; most of the Muslims and Christians were very much neglected and marginalized. There was also vast difference in wealth and power between the rural and urban populations. The disparity in wealth and power were only outer layers of oppression; there also existed a deeper oppression, through which the poor and the marginalized were threatened with a culture of silence; the vast majority of the poor were kept in a state in which they were unable to think for themselves, unable to reflect critically, and they were compelled to accept the superstructure of the dominant upper caste and upper class ideologies.

So, social action against injustice became essential and involved conscientization through dialogical education, and political and cultural action for freedom. We have classical examples of Mahatma Gandhi, Paulo Freire and other social activists who educated the people through non-violent social action. Social action aimed and still aims at change of the social system; through conscientization it releases the potential of the have-nots in the system by focusing on the injustice in the system, conscientizing people, and initiating group political action, based on the dialectical understanding of development. In dialectical terminology, praxis is reflection and action, i.e., reflecting on the current situation, through identification with the poor and preferential option for the poor, and finally let the political action flow from the conscientization.

Since various forms of injustice and discrimination continue to exist in most parts of the world even today, we have also to be participants in the overall struggle for justice and equality. Modern means of mass communication have increased our ability to know almost instantly about the needs of others, challenging us to share with their situation and difficulties. So, we must remember that 'action for justice and participation in the transformation of the world' is a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel'.

**Why Struggle for Justice:** As we noted above in passing, reflection on unjust systems reveals that there is not only an external structure of exploitation, but also an internal pattern of exploitation through a culture of silence, i.e. the deprivation of the ability of the vast masses to reflect freely. Every human

being is endowed with two special faculties gifted by God, intellect and will. Intellect helps one to think freely, creatively and critically; will is endowed with freedom. We use these faculties for praxis, the creative intervention in the world in order to become more human and also to humanize the world more and more. Only human being is capable of adapting the world to himself, rather than being adapted to the world; the other animals mostly adapt themselves to the world. Praxis is critical and creative intervention of human beings in the world for changing the world for better. Internal exploitation consists in stifling the creativeness of thinking, conditioning the others to think as the masters want them to think and controlling the freedom of the will through fear so that they do not act independently. In exploited conditions, people act as the masters ask them to act and do not think or act for themselves. This is called culture of silence. Through culture of silence, man is made an object; his ability to be a subject of thinking and action is denied.

According to 'social action' theorists, social relationship is often characterized by conflict. Conflict occurs when power is exercised in action, i.e. when social action is intentionally oriented to carrying out the actor's will against the resistance of others. Why do social actions often tend to exercise power and try to control others? Whatever be theological understanding of the human nature, sociologically speaking, the self-interested human beings simply have no other way than the exercise of power to control others if they want to enhance the satisfaction of their interests by obtaining the scarce resources in the society. 'Resources' mean not just material

things alone, but material or non-material goals that will satisfy the manifold interests of human beings. Thus there are material interests like wealth, social position, and power, and value interests like attainment of religious and spiritual goals. As long as such resources are not freely available to all (even many of the spiritual resources are scarce, since the conditions on which their availability depends are not free), people tend to control others in order to prevent them from attaining these scarce resources so that their own opportunities are not reduced and to obtain them for themselves in order to satisfy their own interests.

Every group or association, therefore, is the embodiment of man's collective striving for the satisfaction of some interests. If the interests of a number of groups happen to be the same, conflict becomes unavoidable, since no group can succeed in achieving their goals without exercising power with reference to other similarly placed associations. For, from a 'conflict' point of view, one cannot obtain the resources that are scarce, without controlling others. This – the element of power in social action – is the primary source of conflict in society. Over and above this natural tendency of groups to become conflict-generative, the superimposition and coalescence of additional interests in the course of history may and do reinforce the tendency and aggravate the divisive impact.

Thus, unjust structures are created due to sectarian interests and exercise of power. Those who satisfy their interests become 'the haves' and those who do not, 'the have-nots'. Three major bases of power and areas of its exercise are: economic:

money power; social: status or position power; political: political power. In India economic disparity is one of the steepest in the world; several types of social discrimination like caste, race etc. are superimposed on it; political unaccountability and corruption add unjust powers over and above the others. Social Action against any or all of these should be an essential part of social apostolate.

In order to end the culture of silence and consequent exploitation, conscientization, as we noted above, becomes necessary. This conscientization takes place through dialogical education (not banking education); the former helps one to use critical thinking capacity in dialogue with the world, while the latter just conditions one to accept the status quo.

Unfortunately, one does not find elements of such critical thinking in the pattern of education Chavara introduced; probably it was confined to collecting some elementary information about life while the vast majority was steeped in ignorance. The chief reason for such a limitation might have been the vision of education prevalent in those days, and also the fact that Chavara was a Catholic priest, not at all trained in such critical thinking in a Catholic culture. But some of the thinkers who came after him manifested much more critical thinking; persons like Chattambi Swamikal, Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, Bhattathirippad and so on. That is probably why they are considered leaders of social action much more explicitly than Chavara.

### **Caste Discrimination and Need for Dalit Theology:**

Much more complex and difficult to deal with is the case of



Dalits in the caste system. As we know, unlike class, caste is a closed system in which vertical mobility is almost impossible. Besides, caste is characterized by severe laws of purity and pollution, which cannot be removed from society easily. So, liberation from the caste oppression is impossible unless taboos and sanctions attached to caste are removed, and caste-consciousness is allowed to fade gradually from the Indian mind. The social discrimination in the Indian society becomes more aggravated as the classes and castes coalesce and reinforce each other. Upper castes are upper classes too; similarly lower castes are lower classes also. In India, 16% are Scheduled Castes; 8% Scheduled Tribes; 52% Other Backward Classes; 18% Minorities (12% Muslims, 2.5% Christians, 1.5% Sikhs, 2% Others). Only 6% are the so called upper classes and castes.

Within the discriminated castes, the condition of the *dalits* is the worst. They are the former untouchables. Though untouchability is legally banned in India, the untouchable have been and still are the most oppressed sections in most parts of India. As untouchables, they are the former slaves who were not allowed to enjoy for centuries even the most fundamental human right of being a human person. They were dehumanized like objects which could be bought and sold in the market; thus they were denied even the basic status of personhood. Since they were outside the caste system, they did not have any type of social intercourse with other sections of the society. They were also completely outside the religious system; they had been practicing some forms of primitive religions outside the mainstream Hinduism.

Whatever was said of the theology of liberation of other types of oppressed groups elsewhere is most acutely applicable to Dalit Theology too. Gospel teaches universal brotherhood in the place of discrimination; human being is given central position (even Sabbath is for man) in the face of dehumanization; Jesus calls for worship in spirit and truth against those who did not allow others to enter places of worship. However, in the Indian Church there still exists caste discrimination: even though *dalits* form about two thirds of all the Christians in India, *dalit* Christians are not proportionately represented in Church offices, and are discriminated in marriage and priestly vocation; the very demand by the Church leaders for special reservation for them within the Christian community is a sign of their lack of assimilation into the community. There is a broken identity for dalits in the Church – no dalit identity as they are no more legally dalits after conversion into Christianity, no Indian root either as they were not considered part of the mainstream Hinduism till their conversion, no Christian root as they are discriminated within the Church too.

In this case also the Christian leadership could do very little only for the emancipation of the Dalits. Even in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Christians, particularly the so-called upper caste Christians comprising of the Mar Thoma Christians, are not inclined to death with the Dalit Christians as equals. This is very evident in the selection of marriage partners, candidates to priesthood and religious life and office-bearers in various church groups. Even a person like St Chavara, who is considered to have helped the emancipation of the Dalits

through education, could not, during his time, take bold step to strongly challenge the discriminations in his own community. It is noted that in the first church he built at Mannanam he could not persuade both traditional Catholics and Dalit Catholics to worship together against the objection of the former, and he had to be content with building another chapel for the latter separately from the one for the former group. All this shows the limitations of Chavara's efforts to implement the vision of Jesus that all human beings irrespective of colour, caste, race, gender etc are children of God, the universal Father and hence we are all brothers and sisters. However, we can certainly say that Chavara tried his best to lay the foundation of such a community, or the kingdom of God that included the social dimension in our region as much as possible during his time.

**Liberation of Culture:** As we know, culture is the totality of human society's life-style. It has two aspects: material and non-material. By material culture is meant all things and artefacts which human beings use, and which carry some specific stamp of the life pattern of the particular group or society during a particular period - for example, elements of material culture like dress, food, house architecture, equipments etc. The non-material culture is the vision or attitude that is prevalent in a society due to the cumulative effect of its religion, philosophy, art etc. Attitudes towards vegetarian food, idea about women's position in the society, idea of God etc. are some examples of the elements of non-material culture. The Indian culture is dominated by Brahminical religion and western influence due to colonialism. However, the former dominates

the mentality of most of the people, while the latter has influenced more the urban elite. The original native culture is pushed aside and marginalized as a subaltern culture today. Some of the prominent elements of the Brahminical Indian culture are:

1. Cyclic view of history: Fatalism and concept of karma that ties down the minds of the people to the past are the chief effects of this vision. The idea of karma not merely affects the minds but even the belief that our future existence is shaped or conditioned by the past karma. In this perspective, even some crude beliefs arise like your negative karma of the past can make you born as a sub-human being (e.g. animal) in the next birth. The belief that the past influences the present leads to disinterestedness in progress; hope ceases to be a powerful characteristic of such a society. The negative aspects of this cyclic view should be corrected by a linear view of history which emphasizes hope, interest in the future and readiness to leave aside the past and follow the impetus for progress.

2. The concept of Mukti and Moksha: The foundation of this concept is the view that this world and this life itself is unreal or maya. Hence, yearning for liberation from this life of maya and escape from the bondage of this 'unreal' life to a real life that awaits us later are the chief characteristics of this conviction. This generates negative attitude towards this world and shallow interest in the present life. Instead, from the perspective of the kingdom of God, an idea of transcendence, i.e., transcending the limitations, drives and attractions of this world and achieving fullness of humanity, a kind of evolution to the divine sphere, should replace the urge for mukti from the unreal unlike what the Indian culture teaches.

3. Instead of the prominent cosmic religiosity found in the Indian culture that gives less emphasis to interpersonal relationship and considers norms and laws as static, or as given, (*sanatana dharama*) to which individual religiosity must conform, more central should be the status of human beings. Even though a holistic view of the world including nature is good in itself, this world-view lacks the importance for interpersonal relationships among the human beings which ethical religiosity emphasizes; since human being is the centre of an ethical consideration and he/she is creative, such ethical perception becomes dynamic and growth-oriented as it is rooted in man's growing understanding of his role in the society and the world and his ability to transform the world.

4. Brahminical religion gives more importance to the individual than the community; there is little importance to the social aspect of salvation; role of the community is negligent in practicing the Brahminical religion. This can be balanced with the communitarian emphasis that the Semitic religions have developed. In the traditional Hindu worship patterns, we do not find communitarian acts; each individual tries to experience the *samipya*, transform through *sarupya* and finally enjoy the *sayujya* with the divine. It is only in the modern forms of Hindu organizations like Ramakrishna Mission, Sree Narayan Dharma Paripalana Sangham, communities of Ashram model Hindu monks etc. that we find common life and prayers almost like the Christian religious communities, probably influenced by the practices that exist in the latter and introduced by the Hindu leaders during the reform period.

5. Indian culture has a deep sense of fear, fear of pollution, fear of karma, fear of future and so on. Fear is the emotion that

controls the effort towards mukti. Fear makes the humans imagine and develop different kinds of taboos – taboos of time, objects, places, practices, even other human beings. This should be overcome with a culture of freedom, freedom of the children of God and hope for growth, freedom from the fear of pollution, of past (forgiving God), of the future (promise of God), fear of other persons (no caste taboos).

There have been attempts in the past to liberate the Brahminical religion from the above mentioned elements. Buddhism and Bhakti movement were two such attempts. Both succeeded only partially. Christianity could have played a very constructive role; but it has also failed. Instead today, there is a revival of the Brahminical religion itself through RSS and BJP which serve the interests of the upper castes. However, the occasional efforts of the backward communities and the scheduled castes to rise against injustice and exploitation are indications of a climate of change which Christianity can consider as a fertile soil for its liberative message. The message of Jesus emphasized the removal of all kinds of discriminations based on the rich versus the poor (class), the great versus the least (social), the wise versus the simple (caste), man versus woman (gender), the parents versus the children (dignity of human person irrespective of age), the pure versus the impure (pollutions and taboos) etc. Accordingly the early Church began as a counter-culture movement. How far can the effectiveness of the early Church be regained by today's institutional culture is a big question! We must confess that the Syrian community was not very successful in these respects, probably due to the limitations of its own perceptions, even though St. Chavara

took the first steps through education to remove such discriminations. Probably he himself could not move far forward due to the constraints of his time and his own understanding of transforming the human society. Of course, he laid the foundation of the kingdom of God under the very radical idea of the common fatherhood of God at a time when even God was conceived as sectarian; but to translate that idea into everyday real life was and is very challenging.

On the other hand, there are some very good elements in the Indian culture that should influence Christianity's theologizing also. More importance could be given to such elements to enrich and build on what St. Chavara started.

1. The importance of the immanence of God – *antaryamin* - that is found in all oriental religions is one of them. Though Christianity has the idea of incarnation and hence the concept of immanence of divinity (Holy Spirit, Grace, Communion etc.), still the popular view of God is of the one who is transcendent, and is very prevalent and influential in the people's mind. This is inherited from the Jewish religion and should be balanced much more strongly with the reality of incarnation and its continuation through the presence of God in the Church and within each person.

2. The idea that the nature is the global mother who nurtures all living beings is very strong in the Indian culture through the influence of Hinduism and its perception of the all-sustaining earth. Hence oriental religions, particularly Hinduism, are more eco-friendly; this view should be protected and respected, and the Semitic religions which are more anthro-po-centred and have very little cosmic outlook at least

in practice can learn several fruitful elements from the cosmic view of human life and religiosity that the oriental religions maintain.

**Liberative Process and Plurality of Religions:** Unlike the West, India is the cradle of all important world religions; all oriental religions originated here; and all the Semitic religions came to India, particularly to South India, from the very beginning of their existence. Hence Indian society is characterized by plurality of religions. This plurality has helped the people to experience a lived dialogue of religions. The St. Thomas Christians lived in perfect harmony with the followers of other religions and accepted the fact that the others would attain salvation through their religions, a very liberal understanding in those days. It could be seen as ecumenism in action in pre-Portuguese days.

Plurality, though in itself manifests the richness and variety of a phenomenon, can be a source of conflict also since religions are institutions, and the institutions have their own interests. When more than one religion exists in the same society, these interests come into conflict with one another since the interests are of similar nature. Each religion or religious institution begins to exercise power over the others in order to control the latter and to promote its own interests. However, a religious vision that can transcend the boundaries of institutions can have an inclusive religious perspective. But such is not the case in actual situation; hence religions often become sources of conflict.



The interests the religions try to promote can be spiritual as well as material. One of the core interests of most religions, the increase in the number of followers through proselytization is itself a source of conflict when more than one religion try to proselytize in the same place at the same time. Over and above that, several non-spiritual power interests such as political, social and economic coalesce with the former and aggravate the potential for conflict.

In the context of plurality of religions, it is important to understand the concepts of uniqueness and universality of mission which some religions including Christianity claim. First of all, if these characteristics of religious experience originate from God and is part of genuine divine revelation, they should be a source of unity and peace for humankind, not a cause for division and conflict. The uniqueness of revelation claimed must be preached and the universal mission exercised in such a way that no one exercises power over the others and contains the others' freedom of conscience. The exercise of power can in no way be justified as that is against the basic dignity of human person and no God (as we understand the concept of God today) will demand the oppression of a human person or group by another. Such a view will pave the way for the liberation of religions from narrow and exclusivist worldviews; it will also help religions to work together for the total liberation of human being in the Indian context. For this purpose, a few points, very important in the Indian situation, are to be taken into account.

**Understanding Uniqueness and Universality:** The modern multi-religious situation demands that the concepts of uniqueness of revelation and universality of salvific mission need to be re-examined and reinterpreted in the context of plurality of religions. In Christianity we find an evolution in the understanding of Christology and Ecclesiology over the centuries with regard to the plurality of religions. i) Christianity originated as a 'way' with no clear boundaries of an institution; it could exist along with Judaism, even as a part of Judaism. Then it transcended the boundaries of Judaism with no distinctive structures of a religion; such was the case when it decided to abolish circumcision and purity laws, relativised the Sabbath law, and universalized the concept of God and declared that there is no Jew or Gentile before God. Christianity was a movement at that time, a movement with a new vision and spirituality rather than clear theological doctrines and administrative structures. ii) However, soon Christianity transformed itself into an institution with clear doctrines, cultic practices and administrative rules. Along with it there developed a clear ecclesiocentric idea of mission and salvation with an exclusive Christology. The attitude of this period is summed up in the saying, *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus* (No salvation outside the Church). iii) After the discovery of the new world (Americas) and the encounter of the Europeans with Asian religions, there emerged a Christocentric view which is known as inclusive Christology. Christ is considered the unique source of salvation, but even those who have not encountered Christ are believed to be saved through him. They were said to be "anonymous Christians". Theologians in this

era spoke of “Unknown Christ of Hinduism” and so on. iv) But with Vatican II, the Christian theologians have begun speaking about a ‘theocentric view of salvation with normative Christology’. Christ is seen as the norm and mediator of salvation; however, as God himself is the source of salvation, He provides “rays of revelation” even in other religions so that all are saved and brought to God, of course with reference to and due to Christ who is the sole saviour. v) Today, there are several non-Catholic theologians who speak about ‘a theocentric view of salvation with non-normative Christology’. According to them, Christ is the norm and mediator of salvation only for those who encounter him consciously. For others, God has his own ways of salvation. This view is not significantly different from the idea that all religions can be sources of salvation in the same manner. The Catholic Church has not accepted such a relativist and pluralistic view of salvation. However, it is expected that Christology and Ecclesiology will undergo a great deal of rethinking in the coming years as other religions assert their position and role in the universal salvation of humankind.

**Growth of Communalism:** Communalism is the product of mixing religious feelings (primordial feelings) with non-religious interests. A religious community tries to enhance its political, social or economic interests by arousing the feelings of religious solidarity that is still strong in some societies, and makes it the source of power for achieving the above types of non-religious goals. One of the chief reasons for such exploitation of religious emotions for secular interests could be the fact that the particular religious communities were in the

past discriminated at the political, social or economic areas not due to any secular reasons but on the basis of religion. Hence the same primordial religious feeling is utilized by these communities or groups and its leaders for the redress of such a discrimination through religious groupings and exercise of power. Since the arousal of primordial feelings can be successful only in non-secularized societies, communalism is found to be very active in underdeveloped and unsecularized societies like India.

**Separation of Religion and Other Spheres:** Due to the plurality of religions (or Churches) and the conflict this plurality can generate as we just noted, there have been attempts to separate religion from other spheres of human social life, particularly politics. When society was religiously homogenous, both religion and politics could influence each other without any institutional problems. If at all some problems arose, they were due to conflicts between the persons who exercised authority in religion and politics, not due to any structural reasons. When the society became religiously heterogeneous, i.e., when the followers of different religions began to live together in the same society, it became difficult for politics to be exercised according to the view and norms of one particular religion. There arose clashes in Europe in the name of religious affiliation after the Reformation. The only way to maintain peace in such a heterogeneous situation was to exercise politics separated from religion. Thus the concept of secular state emerged. Similar is the case of other spheres of life such as economics, education etc. Following politics, other spheres of life also gradually beIn such a situation, what would be the

value-base of such enterprises? Which religion will provide values for the functioning of these spheres? Will the values be generic taken from all religions as common denominators? Or can such enterprises be undertaken value-neutrally? Since politics, economics etc. are sciences, do they need a value-base?

It is sometimes pointed out that pure humanistic values that do not have any direct and immediate link with religions could function as the foundation of ethics of the above noted spheres. But, can we identify and separate such independent humanistic values, which have not at all been influenced by the religious or spiritual background of the person or the group? Even though most of the values the human beings have developed over the centuries and put into practice in life have originated and have been influenced by the religious perceptions of each time and place, there have been attempts from the time of enlightenment to discover some pure human values based on free rational thinking oriented to the good of the individual and group. Once upon a time, people expected that such values would be accepted by more and more persons, and there would be a convergence of such values globally gradually removing the boundaries of distinct religious values. But, today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, what we find is the return of even very crude and archaic religious values from almost all religions, and their influence on the ordering and functioning of various spheres of life have made people more distant from one another rather than bringing them together. Thus we are in the grip of crass communalism in spite of widespread growth of science and rationality. Communalism founded on emotionality and science and technology based on rationality

co-exist mysteriously in the modern society. It seems nothing short of a modern miracle.

**Feminist Theology:** Modern feminist movements and writings originated in the context of the awareness that women have been oppressed and marginalized for a long time in a male dominated or patriarchal society. Women have been discriminated against for centuries – no property rights, no education, no right to decide on marriage, no right to represent in court and defend, no voting rights, no independence, no equality in sex morality etc. Arising from the experience of such discriminations, modern feminist efforts have manifested a variety of approaches to change such discriminations. i) Equal opportunity for women instead of the stereotyped positions and roles; this is known as liberal feminism; ii) celebration of the emotional and the natural female world along with the male against the androcentric world; this is known as romantic feminism; iii) antipathy towards any aspect of culture that is male-linked and repudiation of feminine characteristics that are viewed as weak or discriminatory.

Almost all religious traditions have discriminated against women in theory and in practice. Judaism had a negative approach to women. The prayer of a male Jew to God was that he thanked Him since he was not made a gentile or a woman. Besides, Judaism had the following views and practices: female child was seen as less desirable, females were abused by males as a custom, property rights were exclusively in the custody of man, women were denied equal dignity in public (men will not talk to women in public!), women had no

right to divorce, they were seen as unclean especially during the period of child birth and menstruation, monetary value of women's work was much less than of men, and so on. The Christian theological vision had little feminine elements in it; it saw no femininity in God, women were seen as derived from men as described in the first chapters of the Bible, women were discouraged at least in practice from talking in the public and show independence, often women were seen as more as body, their mental ability was given little importance. The case in other religions was not significantly different: discrimination of women in Islam is quite conspicuous even today; in Hinduism, though deity is conceived both in male and female forms and thus there is a sort of attempt to give equal status to women, it did not develop much and in practice, women have enjoyed little freedom. According to religious instructions that were widely used, women were expected to live under men; the instructions in Manusmriti that a female should live under the guidance of her father in childhood, under her husband in youth and under the grown-up son in old age, are classic examples of discriminatory views about the females in Hinduism.

**Elements for a Theology that Gives Equal Importance to Women:** Fortunately, in all religions, there are glimpses of women's liberation exemplified through the life of some personalities. In Judaism, we have examples of Ruth, Esther and Judith; in Christianity, the position and reverence given to Mary, mother of Jesus. Even in Islam we find the personalities of Khadija, Fatima etc. as remarkably liberated women. The features of such female personalities should be studied more

deeply and attempts may be made to construct a theology of human person that gives equal status to women too.

The philosophical concept of God as transcending gender determinants, in spite of popular views is another step to construct divine-human relationship on equal basis both for men and women. (It is noted that the concept of *Ruha* – a feminine noun- for the third person of the Trinity is an indication of the early glimpse of femininity in God even in patriarchal religions like Judaism and Christinity; God is called by the psalmist as mother too (Ps. 22, 9-10; Dt. 32, 18). The social position and determinants of fatherhood in a patriarchal society and the partial and unscientific view prevalent in the past about father as the lone progenitor etc. might have conditioned the concept of God as male. In Hinduism, the concept of *Ardha-nariswara* and the belief in several goddesses, and the idea of *Prakriti* as feminine in *Samkhya-Yoga* philosophy etc provide more prominence to an inclusive vision of God.

The fact that the original vision of Jesus that considers women as equals before God is another element for building a more gender-inclusive theology. Such views are reflected in the insistence of Christ for monogamy instead of more liberal divorce rights for men, acceptance of women by Jesus as his friends and followers and so on.

Treating others on the basis of physical power alone is found only in the animal world. Human being who transcends the purely animal determinants treats others from a vision that he/she has developed through his culture over the centuries, an intellectual vision. According to this vision, women are equal



to men in all respects and rights except physical power. When man uses this vision to regard others, he is in fact making use of the divine vision itself, since it is through the intellectual ability of the humans, man and woman share divine nature more specially than other abilities.

What is given above are a few important areas in which our social involvement in India needs to be developed further. There may be other fields too. In the coming years, the Church, especially the religious institutes, have to concentrate on these areas in order to initiate a process of total salvation for all people in this country. St. Chavara, who lived within the constraints of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala, could not have conceived all aspects of a holistic social vision. It is now our responsibility to build on that and go beyond Chavara according to the needs of the modern times. That is the challenge that lies before the sons and daughters of Chavara in future.

So, the concluding question is: was Chavara's social vision and his social involvement complete and comprehensive as the Church understands it today? How far could he develop it in his times? Can we find the seeds of a complete vision even before the official Church began to think and act in those lines? How should we move forward?

Let us gather together very briefly the chief positive points in Chavara's vision and also its limitations.

### **Positive Elements**

1. The most important contribution of Chavara was his idea and attempt to consider social progress or, more

clearly the holistic growth, of the human beings as an integral part of human salvation. Till his times, salvation was more exclusively perceived as salvation of the soul in the life after death. It was his vision that the authentic growth of human life, particularly the growth of his faculties of intellect and will in this world and the consequent building up of a unified fraternal society as the family of God is the responsibility of a Christian that made him become involved in the various efforts of enlightening and empowering the human society.

2. So, unlike several thinkers and writers who regard Chavara merely as a social reformer, he considered social involvement and reform as an integral part of the building up of the kingdom of God. He was a Catholic priest and was deeply involved in nurturing his community and even the whole society as God's kingdom. Hence, for him, whatever he did for social change was also a spiritual endeavour; Chavara should not be reduced to a mere social worker.
3. Considering the fact our society was steeped in illiteracy and ignorance, and probably imbibing the example of the western societies, he took the initial steps for elementary education for the twin purpose mentioned above – enlightenment and empowerment.
4. What inspired and motivated him to take such a step in spite of manifold hurdles in a society that was almost stagnant and illiterate was his firm conviction that human society is dynamic and that we can transform it by our effort; we need not live content with what is

given to us. God has generously bestowed on us the ability to re-create the world. In fact, Chavara appears to have been convinced that human beings are co-creators of the world along with God and depending on God.

5. Chavara also felt that mere performance of religious rituals and exercises alone cannot generate sufficient spiritual power to change the world, which the ordinary parish priests used to do in those days. So he took the arduous and extraordinary effort along with his mentor Malpan Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukkara to found a band of dedicated religious priests for the first time in India to take up the task of prophetically and critically evaluate the world and initiate creative steps to introduce the necessary changes for its progress, unknown and unexperimented till then in this part of the world.
6. Chavara's experiment became a pioneering and motivating model for the Church in Kerala and even in India to initiate similar steps. In other words, Chavara's social involvement became the first model in an on-going stream of efforts not only in the Catholic community but in other communities as well. Thus we see in the following years similar efforts by various social reformers and leaders to take bold steps to remove the constraints of progress in their communities like the leadership given to Ezhavas by Sree Narayana Guru, to Pulayas by Ayyankali, to Nairs by Sree Mannath Padmanabhan, to Namboodiris by V T Bhatathiripad and so on.

## Limitations

In spite of the above noted positive elements, we can also notice a few limitations in the social vision of St. Chavara, arising either from his own personality and perception or from the socio-cultural context in which he lived.

1. First and foremost was the fact that Chavara was a Catholic priest bound by the strict structures and perceptions of his Church. Hence he was not capable of transcending them beyond a certain extent. As noted above, his authorities, particularly the bishops, who ruled the Kerala Church then were not at all revolutionary in their thinking about social progress. They themselves had not imbibed the spirit of change that was spreading in western countries. They were not ready to permit St Chavara to take steps beyond their own limited ideas, such as imparting of English education, indigenous administration, development of one's own liturgical legacy and so on.
2. Among the foreign missionaries who came from abroad to our country, only the British were rather interested in the socio-economic change of the Indian society and during their time, they tried to lay the foundation for such progress. But the Portuguese who had influence in this part of the country were little concerned about such secular changes and mostly concentrated on the religious and ritualistic control of ecclesiastical institutions. Hence they concentrated on usurping the power over the then existing Christian community and rule them instead of helping their progress.

3. The cooperation from the Syrian community to the efforts of Chavara was not very enthusiastic. His own community, of course under the directives of the authorities, dared not to send its children for studies to the then existing few government schools or protestant missionary schools for fear of coming under the influence of secular education or non-Catholic interpretation of Christianity.
4. The Syrian Catholic community was continuing several kinds of socially discriminatory practices in their relationship with lower caste groups; these, especially of purity and pollution, were considered signs of social status and superiority and, hence they were not ready to shed them. Even though Christians were not legally under the customs of the caste system, they relished practicing them and were trying to dominate over the lower sections of the society just like their Hindu high caste counterparts. They even resisted some attempts of St. Chavara to treat all sections of the society equally, even in a place like church.
5. During the time of St. Chavara, the various disciplines of knowledge had not developed much in this part of the world. Even though information was steadily growing in the western society, due to various types of taboo considerations, the entry of such knowledge to the Kerala society was very much limited. The learning of English language itself was discouraged. No sources of modern information existed in the local languages, and most leaders of the community (in those days, chiefly the religious leaders like priests) were knowledgeable

only in the languages of the past like Latin, Syriac etc. The then existing informative literature was not at all capable of opening the doors of their intellects.

6. As we noted above, mostly the Indian society was static and rigid. Even the idea of a dynamic society was not strong and widely prevalent. The vision that the human society, particularly the underdeveloped society like India, had structural oppression and hence needs structural change through strong and collective action had not caught the imagination of the population. No leader dared to put forward such ideas and conscientize the people. As it was not above, a culture of silence prevailed all over the society, people resigned to their fate and status quo. It was extremely difficult for a person like Chavara, a Catholic priest, to arouse people to a revolutionary change.

### **Challenge before the Indian Church**

1. From the above evaluation, it may be noted that though St Chavara was able to take certain unique and innovative steps to transform the human society on the strength of his social vision, he could not bring it to its fullness due to a number of limitations from his part as well as of the society. As the universal Church and along with it the Indian Church have moved forward greatly in modern times, especially after Vatican II, it is its responsibility to boldly carry forward what Chavara envisioned and nurtured almost two centuries ago.
2. For this, the Indian Church should first become more aware of and be ready to accept the developments taking

place in the Christian perception of a grown society. Unlike in Chavara's times, today the Church is keenly conscious of the all-round sense of equality considered to be a necessary factor in building the kingdom of God. After the few early years of its existence, the Church had succumbed to the temptations of a society steeply stratified economically, politically and socially. Thus we had a Church almost totally controlled by the feudal interests of the middle ages, and it was constrained to live and function so for several centuries. It was only after the secular society regained sense of equality from various sources like the values spread by the revolutions around the world to assert liberty, equality, democracy etc., the Church began to accept values of equality, equal rights for women and Dalits, the basic and equal rights of all the baptized persons first and later of all human beings. Thus, today, the Church has become quite open to the core values of the gospel that we are all children of God with equal rights. Now, it is the Church that has to build on these developments and through deeper social involvement take the society to a fully grown kingdom of God. Church should not remain satisfied with the performance of rituals; the spirit of those rituals should be taken outside the walls of the Church to the life situations of the people. Then only what the faithful experience symbolically and ritually within the Church will become a living reality in their life.

3. Within the Indian Church, it is the Syro-Malabar community that is more powerful and educated and has a long tradition of Christian life for two millennia.

They have comparatively higher number of bishops, priests and religious from among them and also proportionately higher number of powerful institutions. Hence, the Syro-Malabar Church, I feel, should take leadership in spreading this awareness about the new theological vision that gives importance to the social aspect of the kingdom of God. Having enjoyed the rights and privileges of a middle order high caste, the Syrian community had been rather reluctant for a long time to reach out to the less privileged and raise them to the higher levels of social progress and help them experience the freedom and equality of the members of the kingdom of God. It should shed such a coziness and move beyond the comfort zones to lead others as St Chavara did two centuries ago.

4. Within the Syro-Malabar community which has a higher percentage of priests and religious in India, it is the duty of the religious to take a prophetic leadership in such social involvement as they are the children of St. Chavara or have been trained and formed in the model that he began. As we saw above, almost all initiatives St Chavara took two centuries ago were for enlightening and empowering the people religiously and socially. That endeavour should not be allowed to become stagnant, but must move forward with great speed as the modern society is fast progressing. The leaders have to make use of all kinds of modern tools of information and development that are available today unlike in the past. They should not become tied down to the past and just do repetitive types of programs for social change. They should become creative and innovative in order to move along with the society or even ahead



of it in all fields of social involvement. Otherwise, the society that is fast reaching maturity will take leadership and begin to spread programs and institutions of purely secular and commercial nature. As it was mentioned above, even education that was once regarded as a nurturing service for the growth of holistic personalities is fast getting transformed into a service industry with a great deal of profit motive instead of higher goals of total personality development.

5. The young members of the CMI community should be trained in creative thinking and be given enough freedom to experiment with new ways and means to get socially involved to transform the Indian society without, however, losing sense of the fact that we are engaged in building up the kingdom of God. Otherwise, the apostolates that we are engaged in can degenerate into mere commercial activity without a spiritual core.
6. And the people around us should be able to feel this spiritual core through our verbal and non-verbal communication, so that they are continuously awakened to the need of cooperating with this nurturing of the kingdom of God. As the time changes, we should be able to design and develop new and meaningful symbols to communicate this message to the people around us. In this era of information revolution, changes occur very fast; unless we are trained to move ahead or at least along with these changes, we may become irrelevant to the society, and the religious community will lose its unique role in the society, i.e., to awaken the human society to constantly work for the kingdom of God.

So, as the CMI Congregation celebrates the bicentenary of its foundation, it should rededicate itself to a deeper, wider and more comprehensive social involvement to take what St. Chavara began to its natural growth. Let us hope that during the third century of its existence, the CMIs will take such a leadership and lead the Indian Church and even the Indian society to further growth into a genuine kingdom of God, even if the number of baptized Christians may not grow as fast as in the past. Such a renewed commitment and more energetic social involvement would make the Indian Church a handful of leaven (Mt. 13:33) in the vast Indian society as Jesus envisaged, and hopefully function as a sacrament of the kingdom of God in this society.

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