

ST. KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA: THE PROPHETIC PRACTITIONER FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

Women empowerment is one of the main concerns of our country today. St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara was a greatest leader, social reformer and educationalist of Kerala who lived in the 19th century. Women were grossly under privileged religiously, socially, economically and educationally during his time. The education of women is more important for the development of human resources, improvement of homes and character development of children. This was realized by St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara in the middle of the 19th century. The great vision of St. Chavara was that women themselves should become agents of their progress. He started the first indigenous religious congregation for women. The convent was meant for enabling the sisters to devote themselves to prayer and meditation to provide education and social service to the women in the locality. The starting of boarding schools and the vocational training given for the girls were the important attempts to actualize the vision of St. Chavara for the empowerment of women.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Social Reformer Religious Congregation, Vocational Training.

Introduction

Women play a prominent role in the cultural, social, political and economic life of a country. Therefore women empowerment is one of the main concerns of our country. In fact women education was encouraged in ancient Indian society. According to *Vedas*, women should have the opportunity to get the knowledge about *Vedas*. Separate organizations had been setup to provide education to women during Buddhist period. But after that there is a declining stage for women education and empowerment in the history. Evil traditions like child marriage, *sati*, *devadasi* system were also prevalent in this period of time. But at the middle half of the 19th century onwards some progressive Indian as well as English men like Rajaram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidya sagar, Gandhiji, David Hard and Annie Besent etc: worked for making women aware of their rights and empowerment and it was mainly through education. In this line of great social reformers St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara has a unique and special mission for the upliftment of the women.

Women Empowerment does not mean challenging man or taking his place: the man- woman relationship must always be health, complementary, compatible and equal in order to build an ideal family and there by a better society. St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara was one of the greatest leader, social reformer and educationalist of Kerala who walked ahead of the time and prophesied the need of the time. St. Chavara cultivated a culture of universal brotherhood or unity through various services and pioneering activities in the society of Kerala.

This is an attempt to analyse and highlight the charisma of women empowerment in St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara's contributions. Through this the investigator try to bring out the essentials of true spirit of empowering women and depict St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara as the man of empowering the weak session of the society.

Objectives of the study

1. To bring out the vision and mission of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara on the empowerment of women

2. To find out the ways and means to empower women considering St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara as the model.
3. To get the inspiration to meet the challenges for empowering women in today's world as St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara.

St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara - A brief Life Sketch

St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara a pearl truly Indian and a man for humanity starts his life on 10th February, 1805 at Kainakary in Kuttanadu, in the district of Aleppy, Kerala, as the sixth child of parents Kuriakose and Mariam. He was baptized on 18th February 1805 and named as Kuriakose. At the age of five, he began his studies in village school called 'Kalari' under the village master called 'Ashan'. There he continued his studies until he was 10 years old. In the year 1818 he joined the Pallippuram seminary under the tutelage of Malpan Thomas Palackal. His parents and only brother passed away because of the epidemic which had taken away so many lives from the Kainakary village. On 29th November 1829, at the age of 24 he was ordained as a catholic priest at St. Andrew's church Arthungal. There after he became a zealous visionary and missionary for the service of the humanity. He made a history and became the history. He served society as the Founder of two religious congregations (CMI- Carmelites of Mary Immaculate and CMC-Congregation of Mother of Carmel), Formator of Priests, Pioneer of Catholic Print Media, Great Educationalist, Social Reformer, Multi-linguist, Literary Contributor, Visionary for Women empowerment, Torch bearer of Families, Defender of Church unity, a saint of personality integration and fulfillment and above all a man of union with God. After the 65 years of eventful life, on 3 January 1871 he calmly slept in the Lord and was buried at Koonammavu, Ernakulam. His mortal remains were transferred to Mannanam, Kottaym in 1889. The canonization process was officially started in 1955 and he was declared as Venerable in 7th April 1984. On 8th February 1986 he was raised to 'Blessed' and in 23rd November 2014 Chavara was officially declared as Saint by the Catholic Church.

Women of Kerala in 19th century

A look in to the socio- religious and educational background of women in Kerala in the 19th century would be appropriate to understand the importance of St. Chavara's interventions. In Kerala, the position of women never was as low as it is found in some other parts of India. Here, women had enjoyed a high social status in *Sangam age*. In this period, women enjoyed complete freedom of movement as well as the right to education. In subsequent period the society was transformed and the status of women took down turn. In the course of time, due to Brahmin domination, the *sambandha* system, child marriage, ban of widow marriage and the denial of education to women were thrust upon the society, pushing women were pushed down to a lower status. Life in Kerala society until the late 19th century was not based on the principles of social freedom and equality. Its chief characteristic feature was a deep chasm which separated the people who belonged to the high castes enjoyed all the privileges and a high social status. In this period, untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability were at their peak. Several of European travelers and Christian missionaries who visited Kerala during the time of 16th to 19th century describe the condition of women as instruments for the happiness of men. The level of education literacy among women was very deplorable. The condition of women of backward communities and outcasts was miserable and nobody showed any interest in their education. The caste system, janmi system, *sambandham*, *devadasi* system, *Marumakkathayam* etc: were some important social institutions of that time which affected the life of women. By understanding this conditions St. Chavara turn his attention towards the upliftment of the women in the society. He acknowledges women as the ever flaming lamp of the family.

Vision on Women Empowerment by St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara

Dr.S. Radhakrishnan states that "There cannot be educated people without educated women". (University Education Commission 1948-49). Similarly, Kothari Commission (1964-66) has rightly

remarked, 'For full development of human resources, the improvement of human beings and the moulding the character of children during the most impressionable years of infancy, the education of women is of great importance'. In other words, the education of women is more important for the development of human resources, improvement of homes and character development in the vulnerable years of childhood. This was realized by St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara in the middle of the 19th century. The great vision of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara was that women themselves should become agents of their progress. He was convinced of the fact that the family is the ideal source of education. Education and proper training for the women would ensure proper formation of children in the families. The starting of Boarding schools and the vocational training given for the girls were the important attempts to actualize the vision of St. Chavara for the empowerment of women.

Empowering Women by Establishing Religious Congregation for Women

Women of 19th century considered as the shadow of men and their role was solely to serve men and raise their children. They were deprived of basic right of education, property, inheritance, and even proper clothing. Women were grossly under privileged religiously, socially, economically and educationally. The farsightedness of Chavara with regard to women's emancipation is evident in the setting up of a monastic congregation for women. St. Chavara who had moved to Koonammavu, the place near Kochi, Varappuzha, Kerala in 1864, proposed the idea of setting up convents. He had generous support of Fr. Leopold Beccaro OCD, an Italian missionary. The first convent came into reality on February 13, 1866. The structure of the convent was made up of coconut timber and thatched coconut palm leaves and hence it is known as *panambumadam*. It was a historical event. Women, who wanted to live a life of celibacy and prayer, got the opportunity to join the convent. The convent was meant for enabling the sisters to devote themselves to prayer and meditation to provide education and social service to women in the locality. They were taught handy crafts like embroidery, tailoring, flower making, and rosary making. They were taught different languages Malayalam, Tamil, Latin and English. Later in 1868, the first stone was laid for girl school in Koonammavu. The school started functioning in the year 1873. By establishing convents his aim was not just to ensure protection to women and freedom to choose a celibate life. Rather, he developed deep in the task of social reformation and considered this option viable as it encouraged women, not only to share a respectable status, but also to extent the network of their service to people outside their convent. As an initial step, he launched education facilities for women as one of the most important service schemes.

Boarding Schools with Convents: A Cradle for the Empowerment of Womanhood

Immediately after the opening of the convent St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara came forward to establish the boarding house named as *Educumdath* for girls on 1868 2nd January, for giving them wholesome training to become good house wives and to build their families in its strong base. The primary means of giving behavioural formation to the girls by the nuns was through the *Educumdath*. The members of the boarding house had the opportunity to learn from the nuns of that convent. St. Chavara gave the sisters and the children in the boarding house lessons in Tamil and Latin and gave them exhortations. Chavara had sent special books and gifts for sisters as well as for the children of the boarding house. The *Educumdath* aimed at the spiritual as well as intellectual development of the girls as good, holy and educated members of the society. Many girls from different parts of Kerala were admitted the boarding house of Koonammavu. In the *Educumdath* attention was given to the intellectual, mental, social and spiritual development of the girls. They were disciplined and taught to pray and practise the virtues. The main topics which they taught in the *Educumdath* were languages, crafts, cooking, music, catechism. St. Chavara was keenly interested in giving the holistic education.

The women religious congregation spread in the land and most of the convents followed the tradition of having a boarding school for the girl children. It became a system in Kerala and these boarding schools developed as the training centers for young girls spiritually, socially and cognitively. The dedicated nuns became the mentor and animators for the formation of coming up generation. Most of the boarding girls joined in the religious life to serve the humanity. During the first five years, running the boarding school was the main work for the nuns in the convent. They gave informal education for the

girls to get practise to become good mothers and wives in their future. Actually through empowering women St. Chavara was aiming at buliduing the society through forming healthy families.

Education: Energy for Empowerment

Women's education becomes very essential when we accept that the mother is the first teacher of her children. In fact, a good mother is better than many teachers. But there is a wide gap between the education of men and women in our country. This is because of illiteracy, child marriage, *purdhah* system, economic backwardness, traditional outlook and ignorance of parents. These factors discriminate in the provision of education to the boy and the girl. St. Chavara was a man who understood the importance of women's education for the upliftment of the society.

Vocational Training: Support for Self-sufficiency

The chronicles of Koonamavu Convent shows evidence of vocational training and craft work provided in the convent as well as in the boarding house. This is another important step for the self- sufficiency of the women hood. St. Chavara firmly believed that the training of sisters on art and crafts would be a help for women in general to be self- reliant. The farsightedness of St. Chavara is a remarkable step during that time in the history of Kerala. When the first members of the convent at Koonammavu were given training, he made it sure that they could be able to become leaders in the society and also could be earning members in the family. For all the training St. Chavara had the great support and guidance from Fr. Leopold Beccaro O.C.D. The nuns were given special training in handworks and crafts in the convent. Later, these services of the nuns were made available to house wives. They also had got practical training in various aspects of life and to develop life skills. He had taken initiation to find special tutors for training the nuns in various crafts.

St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara: The Visionary for Women Empowerment

St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara is a great visionary for women empowerment. He visualized his mother as the basic instrument for his vocation and he realized the women flock is the strength of the family and society. So he took initial steps for women education and disciplined boarding life for girls for a better future. He actualized this through the establishment of a religious congregation for Women that is Congregation of Mother of Carmel (CMC) and it is the first indigenous attempt. St. Chavara aspired to mould the nuns as spiritual leaders of women in the church and in the society. He wanted to make the women realize the dignity of the labour. The nuns were to teach the young girls prayer and catechism and train them in virtues and in handicrafts. He realized that the religious awareness and prayers of women would influence their children, family and the community. So St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara entrusted the nuns with the noble duty of young girls of Kerala. Chavara's dream was fulfilled through thousands of schools, boarding houses and hundreds of vocational training centers run by the religious nuns of the congregation established by him.

Conclusion

Swami Vivekananda has emphasized "if you do not raise the women who are living embodiments of the divine mother, don't think that you have any other way to their social and economic status". Gandhi had stated the importance of women empowerment in these words, " I am strongly in opinion that women should have the same facilities as men where and when it is necessary". It is accepted that a mother occupies the central point in the family. Therefore Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was very rightly observed, "Education of a boy is the education for one person but education for a girl is the education for the entire family". Around 200 years back St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara tried to actualize these ideas through his own unique methods and means. Foundation and development of an indigenous religious congregation for women, starting of boarding houses attached with the convents, provide opportunities for vocational training are the important steps taken by St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara for the empowerment of womenfolk. Present world already recognized the importance of women empowerment though education not only on the basis of social justice but also it accelerates economic and social transformation.

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