

AN INTEGRAL EDUCATIONAL VISION Chavara and the Present Educational Scenario

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Abstract: Taking the contributions of Chavara, a great champion of education in the Syro-Malabar community, to the present educational scenario into account, the authors assess the relevance of an integral educational vision in the society today as it plays a key role in the development of any country. After an overview of the education at Chavara's time, the authors introduce the initiative of Chavara and enumerate a few elements of his vision of education. He made a clarion call to initiate the expansion of education and to make it a mission of the Church, ordering parish authorities to establish schools attached to every parish church. History proves that these schools became symbols of educational activities in Kerala. They entered the field of education not for Christian community alone, but for the common folk, including the weaker and marginalized sections, which had been denied access to it. Chavara envisioned a comprehensive education and insisted on excellence in it. The issue today is not the lack of knowledge; it is wisdom that is in crisis. Having been inspired by the educational vision of Chavara, education has become inclusive and value based, and excellence is the hallmark of education today.

Keywords: Education, progress, culture, Catholicism, society, Protestantism, school, Church, congregation, women, Dalits, caste, excellence, inclusive, comprehensive, value, Carmelites.

1. Introduction

Education is one of the most important and significant processes which play a key role in the development of any country. A cursory study reveals the progress made by the educational system of Kerala, with its timely response given to the shifts in the socio-cultural paradigms. From the ancient times, Kerala had developed its own educational system called *kudippallikkudangal*.¹ However, unfortunately, education was forbidden to women and those

¹Ancient and traditional educational institutions in Kerala.

belonging to the lower castes. Kerala of the eighteenth and nineteenth century was a rigid, stagnant, caste-ridden society in which freedom was enjoyed only by the male members of the upper castes. The social system was so unjust that it was referred to as a 'lunatic asylum' by Swamy Vivekananda.²

The elementary education that existed at the time of Chavara in some parts of the state had been introduced by foreign missionaries from the beginning of the century. Under the influence of the missionaries, the governments of Travancore and Cochin had also taken preliminary steps to establish elementary schools in the region. However, during this period, the members of the Catholic community did not have any access to even this elementary type of education. They were not allowed to attend the schools run by the missionaries for fear of being converted to Protestantism. The foreign bishops identified the English language with Anglicanism that arose from a rebellion against the supremacy of the Pope. The Catholic community believed that through English education Catholics would be influenced and diverted from the true faith. In this way, Catholics lived without access to proper schooling. A statement based on the CMS school record points toward this fact: "The CMS grammar School at Kottayam in 1834 had just one 'Romo-Syrian' student in a total of 60, which consisted of 41 non-Catholic Syrians..."³ The Catholics were also discouraged from attending government schools since no religious instruction was imparted in these schools. The leadership of the Catholic community, which was in the hands of the foreign bishops, had not taken any steps to start schools of their own.

2. The Initiative of Chavara

This is the historical context in which Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a great champion of education in the Syro-Malabar community, rose as the morning star with his dreams and plans for a society in which all would be equal in matters of education irrespective of caste, creed, and sex. A few elements of his education vision are given below:

²Vivekanda, *The Future of India*, 1897, in *Complete works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 3, http://www.ramakrishna_vivekananda.info/vivekananda/complete_works.htm, retrieved on 15 April 2011.

³P. M. Tharakan, "Socio-Economic Factors in Educational Development: Case of Nineteenth Century Travancore - 1913-1928" (10 November 1984), Retrieved 1 January 2013, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4373745>

2.1. Expansion of Education

Chavara made the clarion call to initiate education as a mission of the Church. While he was the Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Verapoly, in charge of the Syrian Catholics, he ordered the parish authorities to establish schools attached to every parish church. Further, he made lessons in Sanskrit available to students of all the classes and castes who wanted to have access to higher education in that line. With the help of the two indigenous religious Congregations which he established, he tried to spread education to all parts of the region. Besides the parish, each monastery started a school. The first convent of the Congregation of Mother of Carmel at Koonammavu started a school for girls as early as 1868. The response to this call made by the parishes and the CMI-CMC Congregations and their continuous efforts transformed the educational setting of the Church in Kerala within a short period of time. Regarding this transformation, P. M. Tharakan writes that "in the second half of the nineteenth century, Syrian Catholic leaders made calls for educational development, which soon bore fruit. As a result, by 1908 itself, the Catholics, particularly the Syrian Catholics, had the highest number of Christian schools in Travancore and Cochin."⁴

M. Kaniampampil observes that the "starting of the first school at Mannanam and the ... order that came from Blessed Chavara in 1864 to start schools adjacent to every Church was prophetic and it triggered a great social change in the society in Kerala."⁵ History proves that schools attached to the parishes became symbols of educational activities in Kerala.

In addition to educational institutions, Chavara made the print media and publications powerful instruments of mass education and their social mobility. They augmented the general education status of people and strengthened the community in all respects with more lucrative job opportunities, power and status.

2.2. Inclusive Education

The Catholic Church entered the field of education not for Christian community alone, but for the common folk, including the weaker and marginalized sections, which had been denied access to the tools of social mobility. Chavara's keen sensitivity and strong determination

⁴P. M. Tharakan, "Socio-Economic Factors."

⁵M. Kaniampampil, *Blessed Chavara: Herald of Integral Development*, <http://www.blessedchavara.net/l6.html> 10/10/2013

enabled him to discern the anomalies that existed in his society with regard to women and the marginalized sector of the society. Considering the social situation of the nineteenth century, he took admirable steps to raise the living standards of women, dalits and the downtrodden by educating them and enabling them to rise above the clutches of caste system.

Chavara considered all human beings as reflection of God. So he was vigilant to manifest his love for God in humble service to humanity. S. Poonoly notes that Chavara had concern for all people of God and his commitment to work for their uplift was admirable. "He admitted students of all sections of society, including Dalits. It paved the way for a social revolution when untouchability was at its summit. He emphasized that all children of God have an inalienable right for education."⁶

In his far-sightedness, Chavara purchased a plot of rice field to meet the expenses of the school and ordered one of the monasteries to run it.⁷ It is a clear proof of his practical intelligence as well as sincere love for the poor people. Considering the educational needs of children, Chavara initiated a midday meal scheme for them. Against the background of economic backwardness of many people in the 19th century Kerala, this was a move in the right direction. He mobilized children from the nearby villages to regularly attend the schools.⁸ About this midday meal system the Kerala historian Sreedhara Menon writes:

Father Chavara took the initiative to provide noon meals to poor children in schools. This step of Father Chavara was the inspiration behind starting such a reform in Travancore. In the note submitted by Divan Sir C. P. Ramaswami Ayer to the king on 1936 November 26, recommending the providing of noon meals for children in government schools, there was a reference that this was a practice followed in Christian institutions.⁹

⁶S. Poonoly, ed., *In Search of CMI Charism and Identity*, vol. 1, Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2003, 348.

⁷A. M. Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2008, 257.

⁸S. Chackalackal, *Igniting Minds to Transform the Society*, Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2013, 13.

⁹S. Menon, *A Renaissance Leader Who Walked Ahead of His Time*, <http://chavarasetretariat.info/image.php?id=15&action=view&table=articles>, retrieved 31 October 2013.

Though Chavara lived much before the modern women's empowerment programmes, he was well aware that the stability and sanctity of families depended mostly on well-groomed women in society.¹⁰ Chavara himself had a vision of the dignity of women, which was patterned on the divine vision and the original loftiness of womanhood in God's providential care of humankind. He was aware of the social taboos which had tied up the eighteenth and nineteenth century women. The absence of a well-organized education system, caste restrictions and communal barriers in the field of education compelled a large number of people, especially women, to live in illiteracy and ignorance. Hence, Chavara initiated the first of women's empowerment programmes in the Catholic Church in 1866 by founding a religious Congregation for women with the help and cooperation of Fr Leopold Beccaro. In two years, attempts were made to build a boarding house and a school attached to the convent building.¹¹ Professor M. Achuthan praises these attempts of Chavara to empower women through CMC in the following words:

The greatest help the Kerala women obtained for their empowerment is through educational institutions and handicrafts training centres of women religious. They initiated secure boarding facilities for women too; which inspired other groups and communities to follow suit.¹²

2.3. Excellence through Education

Chavara insisted on excellence in education. He had his own basic education from an *asan* in a *kalari*, as was the educational practice of the day. At the age of eleven he joined the seminary and began to pursue his studies for priesthood under Malpan Thomas Palackal. In the seminary, he mastered several languages like Syriac, Latin, Portuguese, and Italian. He became a self-made scholar contrary to the common practice of the time. A record from Mundadan reads as follows:

Almost all persons who knew Blessed Chavara gave unstinted tribute to his intellectual acumen and continuous pursuit of knowledge. In all his writings and correspondence as in many of

¹⁰T. Kadankavil, *Chavara a Multidimensional Saint*, Kottayam: Deepika Book House, 2014, 31.

¹¹*Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent*, 44.

¹²M. Achyuthan, "Introduction" in *Arivinte Vazhiye Thaapasamanassu*, Cochin: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2012, 19-21.

his other endeavours, we can easily discern a person of keen intelligence thirsting for acquiring and spreading knowledge. His sense of right discernment and correct judgement flowed from his intellectual acumen and wide knowledge of various aspects of life.¹³ Having perceived the learning and sanctity of Chavara, the bishop appointed him the examiner of the young priests before giving them the faculty for administering the sacrament of penance.

The erudition and practical wisdom that Chavara possessed were transferred to the future generations through his writings. Amidst his hectic administrative and pastoral schedule, he found time to write on various themes. It is estimated that there are more than a hundred writings of Chavara in several categories that have come down to the present generation. Among them, seventy-five are in Malayalam and others in Syriac, Latin, and Tamil. They include *nalagamangal* (chronicles), spiritual and literary works, dirge, letters, etc. His writings contain variety, poetic flavour, mystical depth, and apostolic urgency.¹⁴ As per the *Positio*, all these writings have been scientifically researched into, and their authenticity has been established by the historical commission for the cause of Chavara's canonization.¹⁵ Apart from the above mentioned list, there are eclogues (published in 2014),¹⁶ liturgical rubrics (*Thukkasa*), and liturgical calendar which are also included in the writings of Chavara.¹⁷

The excellence that Chavara achieved in learning became a source of self-inspiration for him to raise the humanity around him also to a higher level of learning. His charisma from within, so to say, motivated him to see that the people are better educated.¹⁸ In addition to the establishment of schools and printing press, even the starting of a seminary at Mannanam was influenced by the thought that the priests should be better educated for leading the community to a higher standard of spiritual, intellectual and social life. He knew that "an uneducated priest is not only inefficient to do anything in his

¹³Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 451.

¹⁴Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 355-356.

¹⁵*Positio for the Cause of Chavara*, 356; 388.

¹⁶J. Paul, *Idaya Natakangal* (Mal.), Thrissur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 2014.

¹⁷Avila, Dhanya, and Mareena, *Arivinte Vazhiye Tapassamanassu*, Cochin: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2012, 154.

¹⁸J. Kuriadath, *Christianity and Indian Society: Studies in Religious Sociology*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2013, 32.

pastoral work, but might even be detrimental to the salvation of souls."¹⁹

A serious study of the writings of Chavara, especially his letters to the members of CMI and CMC Congregations and the families of Kainakary, his home parish, clarifies his educational vision. His personal life inspires the educators and students of all times to imbibe an indomitable spirit and work towards acquiring and imparting knowledge to better the society. His letters throw light on family's responsibilities for the education and formation of children, parent-teacher participation and educational leadership of priests and religious.

From Chavara's life, contributions, and writings we can surmise that the education he wished to impart was an education that upheld human dignity, that empowered women and the marginalised, that imparted values of life, that led to a deeper relation to God and the society, that enriched the society with good deeds and that made the world a better place to live in.

2.4. A Comprehensive Education

'Value Education' is a process by which people transmit values to students.²⁰ Education for values aims at promoting broader capabilities, attitudes, and skills that matter not just in schools but for making the world a better place to live in. Goal of value education is to transfer values so as to transform students to better human persons and the society into a better society, where all can live in peace, harmony and security.

According to Chavara, Christian schools are duty-bound to impart spiritual, moral, and social values. He instructed sisters to teach the boarders different languages, lessons to grow in spiritual life and in Christian virtues.²¹

3. Education Today

Having been inspired by the educational vision of Chavara, let us have a quick glance at education in present Indian context. According to some studies, elementary education has quite widely spread all over

¹⁹*Atmanutapam*, 1.

²⁰J. C. A. Powney, *Understanding Values Education in the Primary School*, New York: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Values_education, retrieved 12 June 2014.

²¹CWC IV, vii.

India. In a recent article on Education in India, V. Pota notes: "... a high proportion of school-age children are now receiving some kind of education. School enrolment for under-14s has risen to 96 per cent."²² However, this countrywide rise in the enrolment in schools is only a recent development, whereas, Kerala was an exception with almost one hundred percent literacy in 1991 and a very high percentage of school enrolment. And this state has undoubtedly inspired the country to move forward in the field of education. It is noteworthy that Chavara was the main inspiration behind the mass movement of education in Kerala almost one and a half centuries ago. One also notices the direct link between this pioneer in education and the present scenario in the country.

3.1. Inclusive Education Today

In the present educational scenario, inclusive education is an educational approach to include children with special educational needs along with other students.²³ Proponents of this approach claim that with right support, 70% disabled children can thrive alongside their non-disabled peers in inclusive classrooms. The UNESCO perspective on education and the ideals of the Twelfth Five Year Plan in India include right to education for all.

If the right to education for all is to become a reality, we must ensure that all learners have access to quality education that meets basic learning needs and enriches lives. Still, today, millions of children, youth and adults continue to experience exclusion within and from education around the world. The UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960) and other international human rights treaties prohibit any exclusion from or limitation to educational opportunities on the bases of socially ascribed or perceived differences, such as sex, ethnic origin, language, religion, nationality, social origin, economic condition, ability, etc.²⁴

²²V. Pota, "Why Modi Needs to Focus on Education?" *The Hindu Business Line*, 9 August 2014, retrieved 9 August 2014.

²³K. E. Allen and I. Schwartz, *The Exceptional Child: Inclusion in Early Ceducation*, 4th Edition (2000), http://books.google.co.in/books/about/The_exceptional_child.html?id=DX0zfCzuuxgC&redir_esc=y, retrieved on 9 August 2014.

²⁴UNESCO, *Inclusive Education*, [http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/strengthening-education-systems/inclusive-education/\(1960\)](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/strengthening-education-systems/inclusive-education/(1960)), retrieved on 9 August 2014.

In a seminar in Agra, India, EENET defined inclusive education as an education which acknowledges and respects differences of age, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, HIV status, etc., and enables education structures, systems and methodologies to meet the needs of all children so that it can respond to a diverse range of learners and is part of a wider strategy to promote an inclusive society in which all are considered with equal dignity.²⁵

The "inclusion and equity" is a major concern of all educational reforms in India. In all the Five Year Plans, special emphasis is given to the increment of the education of women and that of the marginalized groups, which include groups such as scheduled tribe, scheduled caste, semi-nomadic and de-notified tribes, women, religious minorities like Muslims, low caste convert to Islam (SC and OBC Muslims), Buddhism (Neo-Buddhists), Sikhism (SC Sikh), Christianity (Dalit Christians) and the poor in general, particularly from the rural areas.²⁶

3.2. Excellence

According Twelfth Five Year Plan, quality and excellence are major concerns in education:

Quality and excellence in higher education are not activities, but are products of an environment which has to be built bit by bit at all the levels, the quality in higher education hinges on (a) physical infrastructure (b) adequate number of quality teachers (c) effectiveness of the teaching-learning processes (d) sustained efforts for promoting research and (e) efficient academic governance.²⁷

The learner-centred and process-oriented education, competency, environmental-concern, appropriate teaching-learning strategies, creation of motivation, practice based value education, skill development and social commitment are also included in the Plan. However, it requires a "quantum jump" in achieving the triple objectives of 'access and expansion', 'equity and inclusion', and 'quality and excellence' in education simultaneously.²⁸

²⁵EENET, *Inclusive Education*, http://www.eenet.org.uk/what_is_iQ (1998), retrieved on 9 August 2014.

²⁶University Grants Commission, *Inclusive and Qualitative Expansion of Higher Education: 12th Five Year Plan* (2011), [www.google.com: http://www.ugc.ac.in/ugcpdf/740315_12FYP.pdf](http://www.ugc.ac.in/ugcpdf/740315_12FYP.pdf), retrieved on 9 August 2014.

²⁷University Grants Commission.

²⁸University Grants Commission.

3.3. Value-Centred Education

Our times are marked by exponential expansion of knowledge. Any fast-growing branch of knowledge is accessible to all, at any nook and corner of the world thanks to the technological developments. Consequently, the education system is revolutionized. 'National education' is already transformed into a 'global education'. The present young generation can rightly be referred to as 'digital natives' of the planet. The fast technological development has produced a dual effect in human life. On the one hand, it has brought about easy access to knowledge, faster development of society, quality of personal life, and better global relationships. On the other hand, it has also resulted in the increase of destructive applications of science and technology, environmental degradation, unethical money accumulation and transaction, and deterioration of human values.

The issue today is not the lack of knowledge; it is wisdom that is in crisis - wisdom as the feeling of right and wrong, as the Chinese thinker Mencius defined.²⁹ This wisdom, which comprises of 'fear of God' (Ps 111:10) and realization of right and wrong, is in crisis. It necessitates a new search for integration, as one period of human civilization draws to a close. Learners must imbibe a wise attitude as Mahatma Gandhi adopted, namely, the willingness to open all windows for the winds from other lands to come and the strength not to be swept off one's own feet. This is the moral and the spiritual orientation that education must provide today.

Keeping the challenges of the days to come, educational systems, departments, ministries, etc., are in search of a model of education to face the future challenges. Different models of education designed to direct the twenty-first century education are mostly value-centred. As per these models, students are guided to have a good sense of self-awareness, a sound moral compass and the necessary skills and knowledge to take on the challenges of future. Such students are responsible to their family, community, and nation and are able to appreciate the beauty of the world around, possess a healthy mind and body, and have a zest for life. These students grow up to be (1) confident persons who have a strong sense of right and wrong, are adaptable and resilient, discerning in judgment, independent and critical in thinking and communicate effectively (2) self-directed

²⁹As cited in R. Singh, *Education for The Twenty-First Century: Asia-Pacific Perspectives*, Bangkok, 1991, Retrieved from unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0009/000919/091965e.pdf

learners who question, reflect, persevere and take responsibility for their own learning (3) active contributors who are able to work effectively in teams, exercise initiative, take calculated risks and strive for excellence, who are innovative, (4) concerned citizens who are rooted to their country, have a strong sense of civic responsibility, are informed about their country and the world at large, and take an active part in bettering the lives of others around them.³⁰

The discussion made above shows how there is congruence and a direct link between the educational vision of Chavara and the modern models of education. The similarity becomes more conspicuous when one notices that the former has been kept alive by the hundreds of educational institutions run by the two religious Congregations founded by Chavara, namely, Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI) and Congregation of Mother of Carmel (CMC). The CMI congregation, imbibing the Catholic Vision of Education and the educational vision of Chavara, considers education as the best means of integral formation of the human person for the fulfilment of his/her individual and social responsibilities. This community aims at forming leaders who are intellectually competent, spiritually mature, morally upright, psychologically integrated, physically healthy and socially acceptable, who will champion the cause of justice, love, truth and peace, and who are ever open to further growth.³¹ The most important elements of the CMI character of education are: holistic formation, value education, quality education, cooperation of the families and social commitment.³²

Similarly, absorbing the educational vision of Chavara, CMC initiated its apostolate of education right from its inception. Strengthened by the divine love in contemplation, CMC offers dedicated service in the field of education to foster individuals intellectually, spiritually and physically, so that they may have a mature vision of life. To educate is a sacred call and a great apostolate, through which the members of the CMC participate in the teaching mission of the Church and strive for the total formation and enrichment of students.

³⁰Singh, *Education for the Twenty-First Century*.

³¹CMI *Education Handbook*, Kochi: Department of Education, 2012, 13.

³²CMI *Education Handbook*, 11-12.

4. Conclusion

In the canonization of Chavara, a man of the nineteenth century with a vision for several centuries ahead was raised before the whole world to be an inspiration for the people of this century. It is the uncompromising responsibility of the members of the congregations of CMI and CMC to present the relevance of Chavara's vision of education in the context of the Indian and global education scenario. Hence, the following requisites must also be addressed by the members of CMI and CMC congregations who are involved in the ministry of education: (1) the life and ministry of the CMI and CMC educators must reflect the educational vision of Chavara (2) those who complete their education in CMI and CMC educational institutions must become reflections of the core values that Chavara idealized and propagated.

As Chavara is exalted as a signpost for the present educators, especially Christian educators, he silently invites the entire Indian Church, especially the chosen ones, to be sensitive to the needs and the signs of the time, and to guide the society in the pursuit of wisdom without compromising the values.