

NATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON

St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara and His Contributions
for Social Equity of People on Margins

St. Chavara's Initiatives for the Dalit Empowerment

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1. Introduction

The initial inspiration St. Chavara gave for build up a just society where no one is discarded or pushed to the margins of the society had a longstanding effect as it was followed up by the members of the religious congregation he founded. Though the kind of services and the historical context in which they have been started were small and limited, they became an abiding mandate for the CMI congregation which inherited his chrism to stand always with, in the words of Tagore, the last and the least and the lost.

The subject assigned to me is the initiatives of St. Chavara for the empowerment of the dalit, however, I would like rather to speak in the context of 'social equality of people on the margins, the general title adopted for this seminar. The term Dalit is a recent one adopted by the Dalits themselves to indicate the fact that they are the most oppressed, exploited and dehumanized section of Indian society. They form the fifth group outside the fourfold *Savarna* group. The modern terminology dalit refers to all the original settlers (*adivasis*), tribals and all former untouchables and a part of the *sudras*. They were also referred to as Chandalas, Adisudras, avarnas, panchamas, Antyajas etc. in the Hindu religious scriptures. B. R. Ambedkar preferred to call them untouchables and depressed classes, a British innovation from an article written by Annie Besant in the *Indian Review* in 1909 with the caption "the Uplift of the Depressed Classes." Gandhi called them Harijans, which became a derogatory name and is now forbidden by law.

The term dalit is not constitutionally recognized. The Constitutional term referring to this section of people is Scheduled Castes. The British Government regarded the outcaste people as depressed class and tried to bring them into the main stream of national life, liberating them from the deadening hold of the caste-Hindus. The Government appointed Dr. J. H. Hutton, the then census commissioner to prepare a detailed list of such ethnic groups in the depressed class and on the basis of the list Hutton prepared the government published the list of such groups as scheduled castes in 1936. This is the most common structure applicable to India as a whole.

2. The Unique Caste Ladder in Kerala

To understand the social and political constraints imbedded in the state of Kerala where the religious community established by St. Chavara as well as he himself faced, an acquaintance with the ethnic composition of the people of the state is unavoidable. M.C. Kim Marriot (1965)¹ in studying the caste phenomenon of 5 different states found the state of Kerala as having the maximum rigidity. Swami

¹ *Caste Ranking and Community Structure in Five Regions of India and Pakistan*, Pune, Deccan College, 1965.

Vivekananda's oft-quoted comment about Kerala that 'I have walked into a lunatic asylum' is said to have been made on observing the complex dehumanizing caste system of Kerala.²

There are two dominant views as regards the evolution of ethnic groups in Kerala. The one which is found acceptance in the Christian circle³ is that about 4th century B.C. Aryan Brahmins are said to have come and settled in Kerala and gradually other castes also settled in the state, beside its existing population consisting of Cerumar, Vettuvar, katiar, malayar, pulayar, kurvar, and kuricciyar.⁴ The second view is that a well established Buddhist tradition of about 1200 years was existent in Kerala and it was wiped out by the Aryan invaders. According to this theory till about 800 A.D. it is believed to have a homogeneous, casteless society, perhaps of a single race, under the sway of Buddhism.

The much touted legend of Parasuraman is read as a story of the conquest of a non-Hindu land for or by Hindu Brahmins. This story and that of Mahabali are indicative of the Brahmin domination and the depiction of the lower status of other castes. In fact, *pulaya* would mean the owner of *pulam*, which is the earth. Perhaps to destroy this claim that the earth was declared as *Brhamaswam* and *Devaswam* (property of Brahmins and Gods), by the conquerors, while making the erstwhile owners their slaves.⁵ This legend is taken as providing the casteist foundation of Kerala society.⁶ This assumption that caste system was an alien introduction in Kerala seems to be supported by the fact that the exact fourfold caste system is not identifiable here. The caste existed here were Brahmins, Namputiri, Nair, Izhava, Paraya, Pulaya, and Araya. Kshetriya and Vaisya are not recognizable here. The royal families were made Kshetriya through a ritual called *hiranyabarhta*.

Another indicator of the special caste system in Kerala is the existence of 'nampudiri' as a caste which is not found elsewhere. The term 'namputiro' means a Buddhist monk. When the Hindu revival happened, this priestly caste of Buddhism is said have been incorporated into its caste fold as equivalent to Brhamins. Occupation and mixed marriages created in the new feudal system sub-*jatis* (castes). Thus we have *Visvakarmans* (*asari, Musri, Kollan, and Thattan*) working on wood, browns, iron and gold) and castes such as Menon, pillai, varyar, Pisharadi Kaimal, Kuruppu, Nampiar etc. These formed an intermediate caste and class.

3. The Question of Equality

In the ancient Kerala-society all those below the caste of Nairs were untouchables and polluting classes for the *Savarnas*. The ill-treatments meted out to these unfortunate brethren are well-known all over the country. They were highly untouchables. As the caste Hindus established themselves in the society they fell into poverty, slavery and untouchability. Their lot was to work for the caste-Hindus as beasts of burden. Since education and the consequent cultural refinement were denied to them they were compelled to live in hunger, starvation sickness, ignorance and to live in dirty and highly inadequate habitations. They were condemned to do the manual works of sweepers and scavengers, the most

² This region was said to be ruled by Cera Kings and so the name Kerala might have been derived from Cera dynasty of the original settlers.

³ *Marhoma Christianikal*, Thomas Bernard, Vol. I & 2, Prior General's House, Ernakulam, 1916/1992.

⁴ Some of the terminologies in use in the region are indicative of this truth. (e. g. *palli*, the term Christians and Muslims make use of for their centre of worship). The term *palli* is from the ancient Buddhist language Pali in which the term means a Buddha vihara. There are many places in Kerala which end in *palli*, which are thought have been centers of Buddhism Cfr. *Dalits of Syrian Catholic Church in Keralam*, Johnson Palakkappillil CMI, Unpunlished doctoral thesis, submitted to Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, 2007, p. 49).

⁵ J. Palakkappilil (2007, p.50).

⁶ Dalit Bandhu (N.K.Jose), *Kerala Parasuraman Dalitusatru*, Hoby Publications, Vaikom, 1992. The author claims that the Syrian Catholic Christians also were part of this early settlers and he challenges the claim of their origin from the Brhamin caste.

abominable work in the Indian society. They were subjected to social discrimination, ill-treatment, persecution and rejection. They were denied access to the public roads, schools, hospitals, public wells etc. Anyone dared to go against these restrictions were meted out with strict and cruel punishments. The claim of all Christian Churches is that they profess equality and fraternity among all men, but in fact, these are the very values denied to dalit-Christians in their communities. The fact is that even after embracing Christian faith their social status is no better. Dalit Christians in Christian Churches are conspicuous by their invisibility, especially in the echelons of power and position and influence in the Church. They definitely have received doles, their welfare has been sought by the Church by various welfare schemes, but their right to equality and fraternal regard are grossly ignored even today in the Churches.

4. Forward and Backward Christians

Kerala boasts of having a history as ancient as the Church of Rome. The St. Thomas Christians who claim to be the descendents from the first Christians the Apostle baptized in fact have a very interrupted and irregular history with a number of opposing views about their antiquity. St. Chavara and CMI congregation he founded come in the tradition of Cranganore mission of St. Thomas, the Apostle who landed there in 52 A.D. The forward section of this community traces its origin to the conversion of some higher caste (*jati*; Brahmins) from Hinduism. The backward Christians are easily identified with the converts from low castes or untouchables from Hindu fold. Though discrimination of people on the basis of birth in a particular *vana* or *jati* is admitted as against the fundamental belief of Christianity on the equality of all discriminative treatment does exist even among the Catholic Syrian Church. Two instances, one from the history of Syro-Malabar Church and the other from the history of CMI Congregation itself may be referred to here.

1) The work among the Backward Sections

The Malabar Vicariate was divided into three Vicariates of Quilon, Varapuzha and Mangalore and was entrusted to the Carmelite missionaries. Though they had started missionary work among the backward sections of the people, the Anglicans were more effective and organized because of the educational and social involvement they had among the people. This was a challenge to Catholics to organize catechetical centers and Catechumanates among the dalits. Fr. Mathai Mariam Palakunnel from among the Syrian Catholics was the first who took up this mission. He wrote in his diary that he went to Koratty with the Vicar of the church at Manimala and Mr. Chacko of Chirakadavil, informed of that some *ezhavas* of the locality are preparing to go with the Anglican missionaries (Palakunnel, 1971. p.3). After ascertaining the actual possibility there he immediately proceeded to Varapuzha to get the permission of the archbishop. After initial apathy Vicar Apostolic became interested in the project.

He wrote a letter to St. Chavara, the Prior at Mannanam, asking him to purchase a land at Koratty in his name for the mission among the *ezhavas* and sent it to him through Fr. Palakunnel himself. He on various considerations did not hand over this order immediately to St. Chavara. When the Vicar Apostolic inquired about the progress of this project it caused some misunderstandings at Mannanam and Fr. Palakunnel regretted over it when the Prior at Mannanam inquired about it. There was stiff opposition to this work not only from high caste Hindus but also from the Christians who had their prejudices and vested interest. Though the proposed property was not purchased when the Vicar Apostolic came in February 1858 for visitation of the churches, he baptized some eighteen *pulayas* at some centre near Mundakayam.

On this occasion the new converts were made to take an oath that even after the conversion they would obey their landlords and that they would never ask for equality with their masters. This was

done to pacify the forward Christians who objected to the equality given to dalit through conversion to Christianity. Elder brother of Fr. Palakunnel himself was against the baptism ceremony and it was with much pleading he was persuaded to take part in the procession and baptism ceremonies. Fr. Palakunnel also recorded another instance where the forward Christians went in search of water to cleanse themselves after participating in a liturgical celebration specially arranged for the new converts. In spite of these oppositions Fr. Palakunnel extended his works to Kuttanad also where he was able to baptize two thousand *pulayas* (*ibid*: p.114).2).

2) Involvement of CMI Congregation: Catechumanate

Another instance of discriminative practice we find in the history of the congregation is in connection with the establishment of a school for the converted Christians. This instance would be further explained in connection with the account of the educational efforts of St. Chavara and the congregation to show the discriminate element imbedded even in his praise worthy attempt.

The *Souvenir: The Carmelite Congregation* (1932. p. 56) records that at the instruction of St. Chavara a catechumanate attached to the monastery at Mannanam was started on October 9, 1864. A Centre for catechism, however, was already functioning there.

Mannanam Chronicle (vol. III, p. 30) has the following entry dated November 1864:

On Sundays and feast days many boys came to study catechism and remained here till five o'clock in the evening. Some of them came from distant places. Some of them were poor. In order to improve more effectively this so wholesome and fruitful work, they thought that it was necessary to feed the boys at noon with *kanjni* (rice gruel). They were also given clothes and pious articles like rosaries, scapulars, etc. To meet the expenses involved for this as well as for the conversion of *pulayas* and for conducting the catechetical school, the means decided was collection of *pidiyari* (handful of rice) every Sunday.

The *Souvenir* also states that Fr. Chavara opened a catechumanate in the parish at Edathuva. It continues to state: "Almost all the monasteries of the Congregation imitated the Mother-house in opening Catechumanates attached to them. In these, many adults and infants were cared for, instructed and baptized every year. During the period between 1866 and 1931 more than 20,000 souls were gained to Christ by the missionary zeal of the fathers of the Congregation" (1932: p.56).

5. In the Field of Education

Whatever St. Chavara did for the society at large and the Church became a tradition for the Congregation which continues to render all those services even today in the Syro-Malabar Church. The first unique and most important area of his service was the role he played as the Vicar General in the Vicariate of Varapuzha. He was appointed vicar general on June 8, 1861. Fr. Mathias Mundadan after a thorough study of the issue arrives at the conclusion that "from all these references we may legitimately infer that the office of vicar general conferred on Chavara was for life." (MM. 2008, pp.225- 229).

One of the revolutionary step he took as Vicar General was to persuade Vicar Apostolic Baccinelli to send an order to open a school attached to every church in the Vicariate. Some of the historians attributed this initiative to the Archbishop himself, but the long history of the rule of the Carmelite bishops starting from Bishop Sebastiani from 1661 to Archbishop Leonard Mellano in 1887 is a testimony that they did practically nothing to improve the educational quality of their people. This was a strategy consciously followed lest the Syrian Christians become capable of self-rule in their Church. The Apostolic Delegate Bishop Meurin S.J. (1876) reported this negligence especially in matters of education in general and teaching English in particular. The special visitor Msgr. Ignatius Persico

(1876/'77) confirmed this neglect from the part of the authorities in the report he submitted to Propaganda Fide on October 5, 1884.

Fr. Mathias Mundadan gives a brief yet well documented account of the state of affairs in the field of education in Kerala in his biography of St. Chavara (2005, pp. 252-258) and we shall indicate its salient points which throw some light on the contribution St. Chavara made during the second half of the nineteenth century.

It was the Anglican (CMS and LMS) and the German Basel Evangelical missionaries who first introduced English schools in Kerala. Between 1817 and 1866 the three groups established English schools in the whole of Kerala, the LMS in the South, the CMS in the central Thiruvithamkoor and the Basel Mission in the Malabar area. In the year 1866 a college was started at Thiruvananthapuram, and a CMS institution at Kottayam with the status of a college. There was also the Orthodox Seminary, which from its inception apparently functioned as a college. But entry of the Catholics into these institutions was forbidden. The Carmelite missionaries seem to have forbidden the Catholics even to study the English language in private as they feared that it would be an occasion for Protestant ideas to infiltrate among Catholics (Valerian 1939, p.16). Only by 1880s the Catholics were allowed to study English in the schools of the state government. The Carmelite missionaries were very slow to catch up with the modern educational processes.

Fr. Bernard writes about what the TOCD fathers did to educate their members: "The missionary Marceline, the auxiliary bishop in the Vicariate of Verapoly from 1877 did nothing to promote English education, nor there was freedom for it. This being the condition Fr. Kuriakose Porukara, the Prior at Mannanam, with the permission of Archbishop Leonardo Mellano, selected a few members of the Congregation and made arrangements to teach them English. They were Frs. Louis Pazheparambil, and Hillarion Tharavattil, and scholastics Stephen Thayyil, Joseph Kochupalathinkal, Joseph Peedieckal, Abraham Poovathaniyil and Joseph Moolakariyil. ...The writer of this chronicle (Fr. Bernard) was a scholastic who studied English with them. Afterwards also special teachers were appointed at Mannanam to teach English to the seminarians, even though not in a systematic manner (1921: p.342 f.).

It was only in 1885 that a regular English school started functioning at Mannanam. This was the first English school of the Catholic St. Thomas Christians. Chavara's endeavour to promote education among the Catholics should be assessed against this background. When we say that St. Chavara established schools attached to parishes or monasteries they could not have been English schools of the type mentioned above. They might have been a sort of private schools. Even the mother tongue Malayalam was not properly taught because of the lack of the schools and of the lack of interest or vision among the parents in educating their children. Fr. Leopold Beccaro, the novice master of the tertiaries, took keen interest to teach Malayalam in the novitiate at Koonammavu. What was possible at that time was the opening of elementary school or grammar schools, an improved form of the early *asan kalari*.

In a letter written by a number of Catholics on October 5, 1884 to the Prefect of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide it is stated: "There is not a single one among the Catholic Syrians who holds a degree in collegiate studies. There are more than hundred persons among our Jacobite brethren who have such degrees. While there are advocates, doctors and judges in other communities, in our community there is none (cf. Pyngot, 1997, p.103).

Msgr. Ludovic Martini (1845- 53) instructed Fr. Chavara to get Tamil books translated into Malayalam and to publish them from the press at Mannanam. As regards the Sanskrit school Fr. Valerian states

that the school was started in 1846. We do not know much about this school. How many were the students, how long it lasted, what was the aim of starting a Sanskrit school when even Malayalam and English schools were not available for the Christians. We leave that issue here for the imaginative minds to come up with their convincing answers. Today we can see a building at Mannanam which is marked out to be the Sanskrit school established by St. Chavara. Perhaps the present building is the result of several modifications in the later years.

The following is the earliest reference we have to Sanskrit school in the Diary of Parapuram. The reference occurs while the author was speaking about the press at Mannanam and publishing Malayalam translations of Tamil books as we have already mentioned:

At the same time a Sanskrit school was established at Mannanam, attached to the monastery. In it the priests and others in the monastery, as also students from the neighbouring places were studying. For the proper running of the school they had brought from Thrissur a teacher belonging to the Warrior caste. He was an expert in Sanskrit and Malayalam. His services were very useful for preparing books published from Mannanam in proper Malayalam idiom. *Because of his expertise in Sanskrit Prior Chavara also started to learn Sanskrit from him.* (Parapuram: 1473f.).

6. A School for Pulaya Converts at Mannanam

Then there is the question about the order from the ecclesiastical authorities to establish a school attached to every church. What type of a school the order had envisaged? Who issued this order? The Chronicle of Mannanam says that the monastery had received an order from the Archbishop for this effect. Many biographers of St. Chavara and historians of the period attribute it to Chavara.⁷ Following is the text from the Chronicle of Mannanam:

“When Fr. Prior was here (at Mannanam) we received a decree of the archbishop, which demanded that in every parish a school should be established for the education of boys. It warned that those who neglected to comply with this order would incur censure. Mannanam Monastery immediately started the construction of a school. We also decided to establish a chapel with a school attached for the *pulaya* converts” (Vol. III, 1864- 71, p.90).

The archbishop referred to in the letter is Bernardine Baccinelli who appointed Fr. Chavara as his Vicar general and so the letter might have been originally conceived by St. Chavara and at his request archbishop willingly promulgated it with the sanction of censure for those who would not comply with the order. ***The Carmelite tradition was not in agreement with such a drastic action with regard to education.*** Hence the conclusion that it was Fr. Chavara who was behind this order seems to be very reasonable. The manuscript of the circular kept in the archives of Mannanam is in the recognized hand of Chavara. It is most likely that, though officially the decree was issued by the Vicar Apostolic, the whole idea was conceived by Chavara and the decree prepared by him was circulated on his recommendation.

7. Nature of the School

The only question to be clarified is, what sort of schools were they? May be they were private schools where both religion and secular subjects were taught. Regular English schools were of a very late origin, for the first Catholic English School was at Mannanam in 1885.

⁷ Cf. Fr. Valerian, 1939; K.C.Chacko, 1959; 95; P.T.Thomas, 1956; P.J. Thomas 1961 etc. School in Malayalam is called *pallikudam*, a hall attached to the church.

Did St. Chavara think of establishing a college? When we think of his initiative with regard to Sanskrit school it is unlikely that he had never dreamt about a college for the Catholic community in Kerala. Fr. Valerian refers to an article in which Fr. Romeo Thomas CMI, a well known educationalist in the Congregation, is said to have made the following statement: "When he was Vicar general Chavara started thinking of beginning a central college. Because of the prevailing circumstances the plan was not realized" (1939: p.138).⁸ Considering the fact that the Orthodox seminary at Kottayam functioned as a college sending out hundreds of graduates, and that already by 1866 there were two colleges, one at Thiruvananthapuram and the other at Kottayam, it is not unreasonable to think that Chavara conceived of such an idea. May be he had in mind a central institute like the Orthodox Seminary at Kottayam catering to the higher education of both clergy and laity. (M.M, 2005, p.258).

8. At the Service of the Society and the Church

The leadership St. Chavara and the Congregation gave in the field of evangelization among the backward classes and education in the past has been now taken over by the hierarchy of the Syro-Malabar Church since it had been constituted in 1923. The right and responsibility for evangelization among the backward people is now entrusted to the parishes in various dioceses in Kerala and so congregation has moved out to wider areas outside Kerala and it has now become global from the point of view of pastoral ministry. The converts to Christian faith from the backward communities in Kerala are being well organized under DCMS (Dalit Christian Mahajana Sabha) with their diocesan units wherever they are found in considerable number. Now the centres of activities are parishes rather than monasteries.

The mother house of the congregation at Mannanam, where the mortal remains of St. Chavara are reinterred, remains as a single Dalit parish as the perpetual reminder of the apostolate St. Chavara had promoted and the members of the congregation had undertaken for a long time with zeal and real dedication. The congregation even today is committed to the cause of the uplift of all the backward and marginalized people, developing new ways of being with this section in a creative way.

The CDS (Centre for Dalit Solidarity) at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram is a modest attempt to be a positive presence by supporting, in the spirit of postmodern thinking, all subaltern movements and ethnic little traditions to maintain their rightful distinct identity, which is, in fact, a national asset to the capital of Indian national culture. This only can save our nation from the monolithic cultural onslaught of Hindutva movement in the country.

⁸ The article referred to here could not be traced so far.