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**New Scholars**

**TOWARDS AN EMPOWERED  
WOMANHOOD**

**Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara's Socio-  
Pastoral Vision of Women and the Founding  
and Growth of the Congregation of the  
Mother of Carmel**

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Empowerment as a term applied to human beings refers to increasing the spiritual, social, political, educational, cultural, gender and economic calibre of individuals or groups of individuals. Gender empowerment in Indian culture almost always points to empowerment of women. The dream of liberating women can come true only when every section of the society is free from gender bias and advocates improvement of the status of women in the society. In

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order to empower women, the society needs to adopt an integrated approach towards uplifting women and bringing them into the mainstream of national development. However, the present position and status of women in the Indian society in general, and the rural society in particular are still not satisfactory.

The Dissertation entitled *Towards an Empowered Womanhood* is a study of the contributions of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara in the 19<sup>th</sup> century towards the empowerment of women by means of the foundation of the Third Order of the Discalced Carmelites for Women, the first indigenous religious congregation for women in the Church in Kerala. The study is based on the socio-pastoral and ecclesial issues of women of the time and the responses Chavara made to improve, safeguard and promote their position in the society, which is his legacy to the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel (the name by which the above mentioned congregation later came to be known in the Syro-Malabar Rite; hereafter referred to as CMC), and the realistic responses made by CMC in the Church from the time of its inception to these changed and challenging times.

### **Method, Relevance and Scope of the Research**

This theological research deals with both social and pastoral issues in the field of women's studies focusing mainly on the period from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. As and when the study demands, the researcher also explores other scientific disciplines such as sociology, history, scripture, etc. The method of research employed in this study is descriptive, analytical, critical and synthetic. In order to reach a reliable conclusion, the manuscripts and authentic documents available in various archives have been consulted.

CMC plays a vital role in the socio-religious and educational milieu of the Kerala Church and the society. The religious women belonging to the CMC congregation spend themselves wholeheartedly for the integral development of the women of the society, to mould in them an integrated personality. This study can help them re-conscientize and rededicate themselves to this wider mission given to them by God through the instrumentality of Chavara, their founder. Thus reading the signs of the times, the CMC may be able to renew, revitalize and reinterpret its vision and mission to ensure a better status for women in the Church and society in every corner of the world where she is called to bear witness to Christ. Moreover, the study also can help those who work in the field of women

empowerment since the relevance of the vision of Chavara regarding women and their empowerment goes beyond the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Both the members of the congregation and all those who are interested in the uplift of women can face the challenges posed by the modern globalized society in a more human and divine way.

### **Content of the Research**

The dissertation is divided into five chapters, along with the general introduction and the general conclusion. Chapter one explores the biblical understanding of human beings along with its theological, anthropological and contextual nuances based on some key texts of the Bible. The truth of the dignity of the person is grounded in the mystery of creation. From the very beginning, therefore, the dignity of male-female relationship is recognised and their equal status as human beings is illustrated. However, the biblical history shows that in the Jewish society mostly men were given importance and women were considered merely as possessions. The Judaism of Jesus' time and the later Rabbinic Judaism considered women as inferior to men. Into a men's world Jesus came as the Saviour of the whole humanity. His entry marked the beginning of new life and hope for all and especially, for women. Jesus liberated them from the chains of unwise customs and practices.

The analysis of Pauline writings leads to the conviction that none of Paul's statements implies that he thought of woman as less the object of God's redemptive love than man. He considered women as partners in his evangelizing work. All Christians, Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female enjoyed the same freedom, based on their identity in Christ Jesus. This background analysis can help one to understand better the status of women in Kerala in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the light of the divine call. Chavara's dream is in tune with God's vision for women as revealed in the Bible. He assimilated the love, concern, openness and compassion of Jesus towards women. He imbibed the spirit of the Scripture and gave due dignity to women and tried to actualize that scriptural vision in his era.

The content of the second chapter is the socio-religious and educational condition of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala. A few of the important social institutions of that time (the caste system, the *janmi* system, *sambandham*, *smartavicharam*, *devadasi* and *marumakkathayam*) are examined in order to make an evaluation of the status of women in Hinduism. Analysis is also made of the status of

women in Muslim and Christian religious traditions. Various empowerment programmes initiated by Protestant missionaries, the Catholic Church, the government of Kerala and various social reformers to bring about a social change, especially among women of these communities are also discussed. The women empowerment programme of the Catholic Church in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century unearths the originality and the relevance of Chavara in this field of the apostolate. As the chapter discloses, Chavara was far ahead of most of the social reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala society. As a social reformer and a pastor of the time he took creative steps to reform the conditions of the women of Kerala. The foundation of Women TOCD needs to be looked at from this perspective of the women empowerment effort.

Chapter three discusses the theme, "Chavara: A Man with a Vision and Mission for a Renewed Church." As an introductory part of the chapter, a study is made of his own personality as well as the personalities that helped him to be a visionary with a mission. Reading well the signs of the time, Chavara a son of and a man for the Church became an effective instrument in the divine hands for the salvation and sanctification of the people. As mentioned above, the foundation of a religious congregation for women was a landmark in the process of the integral uplift of women. For this venture of 13<sup>th</sup> February 1866, as Chavara himself has stated in the *Chronicle of the Convent at Koonammavu*, the work and help of Leopold Beccaro, a Carmelite Missionary was inevitable. One should not forget that it was at a time when community living and education of women were rare practices and vocational training programmes for women were uncommon. This was an outcome of his realization that the situation of women in Kerala would change with the help of the establishment of convents. As the *Chronicle of the Convent at Koonammavu* evidences he used to lament about the barrenness of the Kerala Church as she failed to produce canonized saints. For Chavara, monasteries and convents had to play major roles not only in forming canonized saints but also in influencing good Christian families as well as societies which have to be cradles of holy lives.

The Fourth chapter underlines how the socio-pastoral and ecclesial vision of Chavara is realised in the mission of the CMC. It is noteworthy that for Chavara the mission of the convent is to become an abode of virtues and an abode of *veda* especially for the integral development of women. Both Chavara and Leopold took keen

interest in teaching the sisters and through them to teach other girls handicrafts such as needle works, rosary making, etc. History shows that this vision of Chavara — empowerment of women through women — became a reality in the foundation and growth of CMC. Chavara envisioned that a group of religious women empowered through education and committed for the glory of God and in the service of people could change the destiny of other women and transform them into dynamic individuals who could make significant contribution towards the building up of the Church and the society. The ecclesial vision of the founder teaches the CMCs that their convents and institutions should become schools of *veda* and virtues and that they should share the spirit of the founder through their apostolate and work for the uplift of women. The uniqueness of the apostolates of the CMC is that she continues the apostolic activities of Chavara in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with various adaptations. Through her apostolate of faith formation, education and all her welfare activities, the CMC empowers especially women and children. In the ensuing years, the CMC has become an effective catalyst of social change and a spiritual movement in the society.

The concluding chapter analyses five major areas of thrust in relation to the status of women, such as, the social, economic, political, educational and religious, to assess how far CMC has empowered contemporary women and what her further role for their future empowerment might be. The socio-cultural and economic status of women has undergone significant improvement. The woman of modern India is liberal, educated and suave. She is no longer confined to the four walls. There is a steady growth in her self-esteem and confidence. She has started exercising greater control over her own life. This has resulted in changed power equations at her home, her workplace, the Church and the society. The number of working women is rising day by day. However, it is noticeable that it is the women in the urban areas who have benefited most by these changes, whereas in the rural areas the situation of women still remains unsatisfactory. Even though thanks to the various efforts, women are empowered to a great extent, the major problems and struggles which they are facing in the present century cannot be ignored. In principle, women are indeed, considered important and equal partners of men in the process of development, but in practice they are still generally either discriminated against or ignored. There are several facets of gender discrimination, both in the family and the

society. The subordinate position of women in several states of India is indicated by the lower ratio of girls to boys, the growing domestic violence, the increasing number of dowry deaths, rape, bride burning, sexual harassment, eve-teasing, female infanticide, gender exploitation in the work place, both in the private and public sectors and the increasing number of girls reported missing, especially in the villages. Trafficking of women and girls is becoming more and more common. Women are easy targets of sexual assault and violence. When it comes to their rights, women are often not aware of their rights to property and education, their legal and political rights, their decision-making power or even their basic human rights.

The above listed predicaments of women are constant reminders to the CMC to think and act courageously and faithfully and to continue working for the dignity of women. The men of the society need to be conscientized about the fact that they can accept and uphold their own dignity only if they respect the dignity of the other half of the society — the women. Equally important is the need to conscientize women themselves to stand up for their own sake. Both these are inevitable to give a dignified life to women in the contemporary society.

Not only the members of CMC but also those who are working in this field need to open their eyes and take the responsibility of finding new ways and means of empowering women. When Chavara founded the congregation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, education of people, especially of women, was in a poor condition. So he placed much importance on the apostolate of education. As far as the members of the congregation are concerned, they have to avail themselves of this apostolic field to empower women not only through intellectual formation, but also through faith formation. The packed curricular and co-curricular work schedules, the higher standards of excellence demanded by educational institutions, and the ever increasing hold of the media over the children and the youth indicate that a teacher committed to the cause of faith formation must be highly resourceful and move forward with deliberate and systematic plans. The dream of Chavara will come true only when each member of the Congregation is transformed into a motivated, committed and dynamic religious who in turn can witness and serve as an instrument of encouragement and empowerment for every woman she meets.

## **Conclusion**

The empowered women of the society have the potential to bring in dynamic changes in the outlook of the members of the society. This empowerment can be achieved through training, motivating and enhancing the capacity of women and children. CMC as a group of enlightened women are empowering the women in the society through their very zealous apostolate. This is not a charity that she does but it is her mission. The relevance of the existence of the CMC in the Church and in the world depends upon her faithfulness in the mission of empowering women.