

THE FAMILIAL VISION OF CHAVARA The 19th Century Socio-Cultural Context

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Abstract: Ann Mary explores the 19th century socio-cultural and economic and political milieu of Kerala and places the familial vision of Chavara in the context to understand the full extent of his instructions that are enshrined in the *Chavarul*, given by Chavara to his parishioners. In order to understand the *Chavarul*, one needs to understand the world behind the text. Discussing the social scenario, she refers to the caste system and the patriarchal familial system, whereas in the discussion on political situation, she goes through the various currents foreign and native that shaped the political life of the people. In the economic scenario, the agrarian society and the interplay of caste and economy in the society is analysed. Taking the literary scenario into consideration, she looks at the educational ratio of the members of various significant social groups, which leads to a discussion on Christian contribution to education, in which the contributions of Chavara are significant. Narrowing her focus down to family system, the author speaks of family and marriage, joint family system, which had a great effect on the families to which Chavara is writing his *Chavarul*.

Keywords: Family, community, John Paul II, children, *Chavarul*, Chavara, society, mission, Kerala, Christian, Muslim, cultures, development, untouchability, caste, religion, *Brahmins*, *Sudras*, *Nayars*, *Ezhavas*, *Thiyyas*, *Pulayas*, *Parayyas*, discrimination, patriarchal, Syrian, parish council, women, laws, British, economy, *janmi*, labourers, landlord, education, schools, Philosophy, Grammar, Theology, Law, missionaries, denominations, Carmelites, Jacobites, Dalits, Mannanam, family, marriage, Polygamy, *sambandham*, Thomas Christians, widows, joint family, matriarchal, modernisation, orphans, destitute.

1. Introduction

Family, as the basic unit of society, plays an important role in it by making use of its human resources and the power to influence

individual, household and community behaviour.¹ For this reason, it has become the focus of analysis in most social sciences. Interdisciplinary approaches have made family also part of theological investigation. Family plays a very significant role in the life of everyone in this world as it determines the future of the individual. John Paul II observes in this regard: "It is the path common to all, yet one which is particular, unique, and unrepeatable, just as every individual is unrepeatable. It is a path from which man cannot withdraw. Indeed, a person normally comes into the world within a family, and can be said to owe to the family the very fact of his existence as an individual."²

Since human life is entrusted to the family to nurture and care, the heads of the family are invited to be conscientious about the duty of the upbringing of the children and care of the members. It is in this context that the significance of the *Chavarul* of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara comes to the fore. It is primarily seen as a set of guidelines to the families. However, in order to understand the importance of *Chavarul*, one has to look into the socio-cultural context of the society in which Kuriakose Elias Chavara was born, brought up, and carried out his mission, especially his mission of consolidating the family. It is with this objective in mind that we embark on an analysis of the socio-cultural context of the society of Kerala in the 19th century. As a result, we hope to have a deeper understanding of family life at the time of Chavara as he envisioned the *Chavarul*.

2. Socio-Cultural Context of Kerala in the 19th Century

The contemporary Kerala comprises of the former Provinces of Travancore in the South, Cochin in the centre, and Calicut in the North.³ Malabar is a stretch of land that is enveloped by Kanyakumari in the extreme South about 580 Kilometres up to Gokarnam in the North. It is situated between 8° 18' and 12° 48' North latitude and 74°

¹Ramalakshmi Sriram, "Family Studies in India: Appraisal and New Directions," in *Human Development and Family Studies in India: An Agenda for Research and Policy*, T. S. Saraswati & B. Kaur, eds., New Delhi: Sage Publishers, 1993, 122-128, 125.

²John Paul II. *Letter to the Families*. https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_02021994_families.html (Accessed on 29.08.2018), 210.

³E. R. Hambye, *History of Christianity in India*, Vol. 3: *Eighteenth Century*. Bangalore: The Church History Association of India, 1997, 15.

52' and 77° 24' East longitude and the coastal belt is lying between the Western Ghats in the East and the Arabian Sea in the West.⁴

The narrow strip of land between the Arabian sea and the Western Ghats is considered 'a gift of the Sea', which is symbolized in the legend of Parasurama.⁵ The mountains also possibly have played a role in its formation. Geologists and soil-scientists testify that this stretch of land, once under sea, might have been formed as a result of the operation of volcanic or seismological factors.⁶ Another contributing role is played by the rivers and the sea. The numerous rivers, originating in the Western Ghats may have brought down in their course large quantities of silt, while ocean currents deposited immense quantities of sand on the shore.⁷ The steady accumulation of silt and sand in turn, created a vast stretch of land.

The land was called *Keralam* or *Cheralam*, a name, which gradually turned into *Kerala*. Etymologically, it is a composite word formed by *chera* (sand) and *alam* (region), or *cher/chernta* (added) and *alam* (land), indicating a land, which was added on to the already existing mountainous country.⁸ The Arab navigators called this region *Male*, which in later centuries assumed Arabic equivalents like *Malibar*, *Manibar*, or *Malayalam*, meaning the hill country.⁹ The Portuguese called it *Serra* also meaning hill country. The language which developed as separate from Tamil was perhaps called *Keralabhasha*, which in the course of time, became *Malayalam*, *Malayma*, etc.¹⁰

Since Kerala is situated at the edge of Indian peninsula, it has been the meeting place of ancient religions, cultures and traditions,¹¹ which

⁴A. Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society Ltd., 1967, 1.

⁵According to this legend, the land of Kerala was a gift of the Arabian Sea to Parasurama, one of the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu. Legend has it that Parasurama hurled his axe across the sea from Gokarnam to Kanyakumari and water receded up to the spot where it fell. See A. S. Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 10.

⁶A. Mathias Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2008, 2.

⁷W. Logan, *Malabar Manual*, Vol. 1, Delhi: Low Price Publications, 2009, 3.

⁸A. S. Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 12.

⁹A. S. Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 12.

¹⁰A. M. Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 3.

¹¹K. Raman Pillai, "Coalition Politics: The Kerala Experience," in *Rethinking Development: Kerala's Development Experience*, Vol. 1, M. A. Oommen, ed., New Delhi: Institute of Social Sciences, 1999, 99-110, 99.

have greatly influenced the culture of Kerala. Kerala has a composite and multicultural nature to which numerous people and races have made their significant contributions. Its salient feature is unity in diversity. The culture has been influenced by the Christian and Muslim cultures which thrived under the patronage of the tolerant Hindu princes. Over the centuries, Kerala has remained a living museum of ethnology, culture, religion and bio-diversity.¹²

The peculiar geographical position of Kerala helped the people to develop a culture and noticeable virtues of unity and solidarity in every sphere of life and activity. At the same time, Kerala's millennia-old foreign contacts helped the evolution of a way of life and culture noted for its catholicity and universality. The neighbouring states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka also have influenced the evolution of the life and culture of the people there. The culture is known for its antiquity, unity, continuity and universality because of the richness and variety of its content. It represents a collective achievement of a people in the fields of religion and philosophy, language and literature, art and architecture, education and learning, and economic and social organization.¹³ The system of joint families, caste and religious practices, and rules and rituals about purity and pollution bound them together.¹⁴

3. Socio-Economic and Political Situation

Owing to Kerala's separate and distinct history, religious composition and demographic diversity, the socio-economic and political development was very unique.

3.1. Social Scenario

Kerala history till late nineteenth century was not based on the principles of social freedom and equality. A deep gulf separated the high castes from the low castes. In spite of the centralization of authority in the hands of the king in Thiruvithamcore and Kochi and the direct administration of the English East India Company in Malabar, the upper castes like the *Brahmins*, the *Kshatriyas* and the *Nayars* continued to enjoy several social privileges. They continued to

¹²K. Raman Pillai, "Coalition Politics," 99.

¹³A. Sreedhara Menon, *Cultural Heritage of Kerala: An Introduction*. Cochin: East-West Publications Private Ltd., 1978, 2.

¹⁴Leela Gulati, *Gender Profile: Kerala*, New Delhi: Royal Netherlands Embassy, 1991, 1.

be the land-owning class and they freely oppressed the tenant class. The law that prevailed in the land was not egalitarian. The penal code was extremely severe as far as the lower castes were concerned. Slavery in the most primitive form prevailed in the land even in the beginning of the 19th century. There were a series of unjust taxes,¹⁵ which imposed a heavy burden on the under-privileged sections of the society.¹⁶ Consequently, the poor became poorer still. Untouchability and unapproachability practised in the society made their life miserable.

3.1.1. Caste System

The society in Kerala in the nineteenth century was hierarchically structured and territorially fragmented. Caste system prevailed in Kerala with utmost seriousness and in all its ritual rigour of purity it was more oppressive than the way it had prevailed in other parts of India.¹⁷ The values of equality, freedom and brotherhood were not maintained in the society. Most of the rites and practices observed at the time of birth, marriage, pregnancy, death, etc. were absolutely absurd and irrational. Often, the people were in revolt due to the rigidities of caste and religion.

The *Brahmins* were the traditional custodians of the *Dharmasāsthras*. They were the lawgivers and interpreters. By the laws created by *Brahmins* with the help of the kings, the *Sudras* were created for the service of the *Brahmins*. In spiritual matters, including matters of worship, they were the masters. They enjoyed a monopoly of scriptural knowledge. Hence, the *Sudras* were prohibited to read the sacred books and perform religious ceremonies. The rule was that if a *Sudra* heard the *Vedas*, they would pour molten lead down his ears and if he uttered a line from the holy book, they would cut his tongue off. If the *Sudra* acquired the knowledge of the *Vedas* he would challenge the authority of the *Brahmins*.¹⁸

¹⁵Samuel Mateer, *Native life in Travancore*, New Delhi: J. Jetley Asia Educational Services, 291-294.

¹⁶G. Krishnan Nadar, *History of Kerala*, Kottayam: National Book Stall, 1993, 264.

¹⁷P. J. Cherian, ed. *Perspectives on Kerala History: The Second Millennium Kerala State Gazetteer*, Vol. 2, Part 2, Trivandrum: Kerala Gazetteers, 1999, 460. Also cited by P. Bhaskaranunni, *Patthompatham Noottantile Keralam* (Malayalam), Thrissur: Kerala Sahitya Academy, 2000, 265.

¹⁸G. Krishnan Nadar, *History of Kerala*, 199.

The caste rules were operated in the most irrational manner. The *Sudras* were seldom considered as human beings.¹⁹ Below the *Nayars* were the *Ezhavas* and *Thiyyas*. Some of the groups below the *Ezhavas* were the *Shanars*, the *Cherumas*, the *Pulayas*, and the *Parayas* who were agrarian slaves maintained by their masters. They were tenants or sub tenants of the *Brahmins*, *Nayars* or Christians. They did menial jobs but the members of the higher castes considered that they would be polluted if a *Thiyya* or *Ezhava* came ten or fifteen metres close to them. They were not permitted to enter temples.²⁰

Occupation was determined on the basis of caste, which prevented intermingling. Public roads were few, and the outcastes had no entry to them. The use of public highways, wells, post offices, schools, law courts, government offices and markets were forbidden to the lower classes.²¹ Those who polluted temples, houses, tanks or roads by approach or touch were awarded corporal punishments by the *Brahmins* and their agents.²² The *Sudras* had to keep a little away from the *Brahmins*. A *Brahmin* had to have a wash in order to become clean if he touched a *Nayar*. An *Ezhava* had to keep a considerable distance from a *Brahmin*. *Ezhavas* could not be approached by *Pulayas* and *Parayas*. If they went near him, an *Ezhava* got polluted.²³ To secure immediate identification of such lower classes, they were required to be uncovered above the waist.

The law that existed in the land was not egalitarian. The penal code was extremely severe as far as the lower castes were concerned. Slavery in the most primitive form prevailed in the land even in the beginning of the nineteenth century. There were taxes that imposed a heavy burden on the under-privileged sections of the society.²⁴

Most of the Syrian Christians of the time who were converted from the high caste families, also shared many of the existing caste practices. It is in this context that the contribution of the British enlightened approach and the liberative and educative programmes of the

¹⁹S. C. Simon, *State and Society in Kerala*. http://www.universityofcalicut.info/SDE/Lay_out_State_Society_on17_Feb2016.pdf (Accessed on 13.04.2018), 6.

²⁰C. V. Kunjuraman, *Thiyyarude Avasthakal* (Malayalam), Wayanad, 1937, 11.

²¹Samuel Mateer, *Land of Charity: A Descriptive Account of Travancore and Its People, Special Reference to Missionary Labour*. London, 1870, 32.

²²K. Rajayyan, *History of Tamil Nadu 1565-1982*, Madurai: Raj Publishers, 1982, 182-189.

²³M. K. Sanu, *Narayana Guru Swami*. Kottayam: National Books, 1986, 7.

²⁴A. M. Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 9-10.

missionaries, especially the unique role played by Kuriakose Elias Chavara in the building up of modern Kerala society are praiseworthy. With the spread of education and liberal ideas in the 19th century, members of the backward communities became increasingly conscious of the discrimination.

3.1.2. Patriarchal Familial System

Another feature of the society of the nineteenth century Kerala was the patriarchal system. Women were negatively bound by the rules and customs both of the society and religion. In the patriarchal society, women had no freedom either at home or in society or in the religion. Often, the education of women ended with the *Kalari* under an *Asan* (Master). They were totally subject to men and no education was given to them after adolescence. The low caste women were forbidden to have even *Kalari* education.²⁵

The St Thomas Christian community, as a socially integrated group, observed strictly the patriarchal customs and practices in the religious and social fields. The Syrian Catholic girls were married off at an early marriageable age and the dowry given to them became the property of the husband. She was supposed to be confined to the duties at home, be a good wife and mother. She had no right to seek a job and earn money. She was totally dependent on others. Even in religious matters, they assumed a lower place. Girls were not allowed to participate in feasts, weddings or ceremonies after a death. Women were not represented in the Parish Council and in other policy-making or decision-making bodies.²⁶ They had no role in society or in the Church, except childbearing, rearing and working for the comfort of those at home. Consecrated life for women was unknown. For these reasons, Syrian Catholic women, like all other women, were backward socially, economically, educationally and religiously. Their potential to serve humanity in varied ways lay hidden in themselves as circumstances did not permit it to be realized.²⁷

Several of the European travellers and Christian missionaries who visited Kerala between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries have left

²⁵Cleopatra, "Blessed Chavara's Vision and Action for the Enlightenment of Women in the 19th Century," *Herald of the East* 6. 1-3 (2003): 41-63, 41.

²⁶Placid J. Podipara, *The Thomas Christians*. Bombay: St Paul Publications, 1970, 96-97.

²⁷Cleopatra, "Blessed Chavara's Vision and Action for the Enlightenment of Women," 41-42.

written records about the patriarchal system and the condition of women in the family during the period. According to these records, all women were to obey the unjust laws and customs and they were considered simply as instruments for the happiness of men.²⁸ All these customs and practices had made the life of women intolerable.

3.2. Political Situation

The arrival of Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese traveller at Calicut in Kerala in 1498, paved the way to the invasion of Portuguese. They made their colonial moves at the close of the fifteenth century. They were eventually replaced by the Dutch and then the French powers in mid-seventeenth century in Kerala. The Dutch who seized the trading centres of Travancore from the Portuguese in 1663 were driven out by King Marthanda Varma in the battle of Kolachel in 1741. From the end of the seventeenth century, the English began to make their presence felt in several places. Their supremacy became a reality in India only by the last decades of the eighteenth century. After the Sepoy Revolt of 1857 the British Crown took direct charge of the administration of British affairs in India. In 1877 Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India.²⁹

The British made their presence felt in Malabar establishing a trade centre at Thalassery in 1683. By 1730 they obtained the monopoly of trade in Dharmapatanam and during the Canarese War (1732-1736) they attained the exclusive possession of Dharmapatanam Island. By 1752, Thalassery was brought under their control. After 1792, the whole of Malabar came into the hands of the British. By a treaty between the English and the Raja of Kochi in 1791, the latter became a vassal of the English.³⁰ In 1795, Travancore accepted the British supremacy.³¹ In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the entire Kerala was under the British rule.³² However, there were numerous local revolts against the British in this period. The revolts of the heroic

²⁸S. Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, 209.

²⁹A. M. Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 4.

³⁰A. M. Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 5.

³¹A. S. Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 322.

³²A. S. Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 304.

Pazhassi Raja in Malabar, those of Velu Thampi and Paliath Achan in Travancore and Kochi were stifled by the British.³³

In the nineteenth century, the British colonialists began to initiate radical social changes all over the Indian territories in their control. The society on the Malabar Coast was no exception to the rule. As the result of the economic, political and ideological interventions of the colonialists, radical positive alterations were effected in the caste-based social groups of Kerala.

3.3. Economic Scenario

The economy of the land revolved around the private ownership of land, which is said to have been the case in Kerala long before the Sangam age.³⁴ Between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, the ownership was passed to the present class of landholders.³⁵ The rights over land were structured in such a way that the owners were the *Janmis* who were *Brahmins*. A few aristocratic *Nayars* owned land but did not cultivate it. They leased it to the *Kanams* who were drawn mainly from *Nayar* communities for twelve years. They leased it to the *Ezhavas* for a period of three years. These were the actual cultivators of the land. The *Cherumas*, *Pulayas*, and *Parayas* were below these castes and had no right to own the land but formed the majority of the agricultural labourers.³⁶

According to the *Janmi* system, the slave class constituted the tenants who worked on the soil but the landlords (*janmi*) had the ownership of the land. These labourers were often treated as slaves who had no rights even on their own persons. This social agrarian system caused a steep decline in the moral life of the people.³⁷ They lived on the generosity of the landlords and masters who fed, clothed,

³³Pazhassi Raja and Velu Thampi who died in 1805 and 1809 respectively are considered as patriots and martyrs for freedom. See G. Krishnan Nadar, *History of Kerala*, 292.

³⁴Sangam age roughly corresponds to the early centuries of the Christian Era, from first to third century AD.

³⁵Elamkulam P. N. Kunjanpillai, *Studies in Kerala History*, Kottayam: National Book Stall, 1970, 324.

³⁶G. Aloysius, *Interpreting Kerala's Social Development*, New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2005, 6.

³⁷A. S. Menon, *A Social and Cultural History of Kerala*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1979, 268.

and sheltered them.³⁸ In Kerala, there existed a huge gap between the rich and the poor. It affected the intellectual, psychological and mental development of the people. The Christians and Muslims followed the practice of the class dominated versions of the same social hierarchies and were accommodated in the overall system.³⁹

In the nineteenth century, trade with Europe thrived and led to the flow of wealth into the country from new sources. It also introduced European fashions and luxuries to Kerala. Though there were developments in various areas of life, caste system and slavery that were prevalent in the society remained largely untouched. It was in this context that Kuriakose Elias Chavara came forward with the vision that if the families were empowered, the society would be empowered, the Church, and the Nation would be empowered. He hoped that it would reduce the gap between the rich and the poor.

3.4. Educational Scenario

Among the Indian federal states, Kerala stands in the forefront in the matter of literacy. India had a literacy rate of around 12% at the time of independence and through constant efforts, has now attained a literacy rate of 72.99% as per the census of 2011, whereas Kerala has the highest literacy rate of 94.00%, with the male literacy rate in Kerala of 96.11% and the female literacy rate of 92.07%.⁴⁰ The unique position, which Kerala has attained in the educational map of India is not the result of a shoot up of activity in the field of education in recent times. It is the result of the enlightened policies implemented by its rulers from early days and the intellectual pursuits of the people spanning over several centuries.⁴¹

The history of education in Kerala goes back to the Sangam age. There were traditional village schools, which had initiated learning. There was a high level of literacy in this period, in which co-education and universal schooling must have been the practice.⁴² There is no evidence of any restriction imposed on the right of education either to

³⁸Elamkulam Kunjanpillai, *Studies in Kerala History*, Kottayam: National Book Stall, 1970, 325.

³⁹However, Aloysius claims that there were important differences in the various regions of Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar. See G. Aloysius, *Interpreting Kerala's Social Development*, 6.

⁴⁰*Which state of India has the highest literacy in 2017?* [Online]

⁴¹A. S. Menon, *Cultural Heritage of Kerala*, 160.

⁴²E. Kunjanpillai, *Studies in Kerala History*, 15.

the members of the low castes or women. But mass education gradually declined due to the Aryanization and increasing hold of caste system. Women and the members of the low castes lost their right to education, which became the privilege of the male members of the high castes. Although the exact statistics is unavailable about the literacy rate of the population of Kerala in beginning of the nineteenth century, it is generally concluded that the literacy level was a high among the Brahmin boys, and other castes below the *Brahmins* had gained a certain level of education from the village schools called *kalari*.⁴³

The temples built in different parts of Kerala during this period served as centres of all cultural activities. Educational institutions came to be established in all major temples. The system of education evolved in these places aimed at the moral, intellectual and physical well-being of the pupils. Specialized courses in subjects like Philosophy, Grammar, Theology, Law, etc. were given there.⁴⁴ Apart from these regular educational institutions, social education was also fostered by special endowments made for the recitation and exposition of Puranic stories in the temples. There were libraries attached to the temples with a good collection of books. In this period, especially during the reign of King Kulasekhara Varma, there were both formal and non-formal education programmes. After the fall of Kulasekhara Empire, Kerala came under the rule of various local dynasties, which continued their patronage of these learning centres. The Travancore court of the eighteenth century became a centre of attraction for men of learning. There were schools attached to the temples in North and Central Kerala which were intended for *Brahmin* youths for Vedic studies. In addition to these, there were also institutions like the *Ezhuthupalli* under Ezhuthachan and Asan, which were intended for non-*Brahmin* youths. Education in the *Ezhuthupalli* received a boost in the seventeenth century under Tunchat Ezhuthachan, the "Father of Malayalam Language."⁴⁵ *Ezhuthupalli* continued to function actively in Kerala until the advent of the British.

⁴³P. K. Michael Tharakan, "Socio-Economic Factors in Educational Development: Case of Nineteenth Century." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19(46), 1959-1967. (1984). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4373769> (Accessed on 18.07.2018).

⁴⁴A. S. Menon, *Cultural Heritage of Kerala*, 164.

⁴⁵A. S. Menon, *Cultural Heritage of Kerala*, 163-169.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the education scenario in Kerala began to shift. Under the influence of the foreign missionaries and the British government, particularly Colonel Munro, the resident in Travancore and Cochin, several educational institutions were opened. The initiation of Western education was an important milestone in Kerala. It brought tremendous changes in the social, economic, religious, political and cultural life of the people.⁴⁶

3.4.1. Christian Contribution to Education

The credit of introducing western education and its liberal ideas in Kerala go to the Christian missionaries.⁴⁷ While Catholic missionaries were doing active evangelizing work in Kerala, the Protestant missionaries were engaged in educational work as well. In Travancore and Cochin, several Protestant Missions such as London Missionary Society (LMS), the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Basel Evangelical Mission started working in the nineteenth century under the patronage of the local rulers.⁴⁸ As a result, educational activities received a great momentum in Kerala. In 1819, Rani Gouri Parvati Bai of Travancore set up Vernacular schools.⁴⁹ Subsequently, a large number of schools were opened and many of them were closed down in a short span of time for various reasons.⁵⁰ It was Swathi Thirunal Maharaja who began English education in Travancore. He brought Reverend Roberts, the Head Master of Nagarcoil Seminary and opened a school in 1834.⁵¹

The Synod of Diamper changed the course of history of the Syrian Christians of Kerala. In addition to many basic changes in the worship and liturgy of the native Christians, the Synod also made several decisions on various aspects of life including education. In a precautionary move, the Synod prohibited Syrian Christians from learning from the people of other denominations and religions.⁵² It

⁴⁶G. Krishnan Nadar, *History of Kerala*, 248.

⁴⁷K. V. Eapen, *Kerala Charithram*, Kottayam: Kollett Publications, 1993, 250.

⁴⁸A. S. Menon, *Social and Cultural History of Kerala*, 297.

⁴⁹*Sarvavijnāna Kōsam (Encyclopedia)*, Vol. 8, 390, cited in T. Chathamparampil and J. Kureethara, "Unique Contributions of Blessed Chavara in Educating the Kerala Society," *Journal of St Thomas Christians* 16 (2005): 121-127, 123.

⁵⁰A. S. Menon, *Social and Cultural History of Kerala*, 298-299.

⁵¹*Sarvavijnāna Kōsam (Encyclopedia)*, Vol. 8, 386.

⁵²*Udayampoor Soolahadōsinte Kānōnakal Session*, 111, Decree, 12, cited in T. Chathamparampil and J. Kureethara, "Unique Contributions of Blessed Chavara in Educating the Kerala Society," 122.

also insisted that Syrian Christian tutors should not attract the children of other faiths.⁵³ The consequence of these restrictions on the community was too severe and negative in the context of the limited educational opportunities that were available at the time.

Those who headed the Church after the Synod did succeed to a great extent in implementing the Synodal decisions. However, the educational activities among the Syrian Christians were totally ignored until the foreign missionaries left the administration of the Church. It is recorded in the historical report of Ignatius Persico: "The Carmelites who rule the Syrian Christians have not done anything considerable in the educational field."⁵⁴ Charles Piaget observes that in general, "the missionaries have not done anything remarkable for the education of the priests and the Christians who were entrusted to their care. The Syrian Christians who were experts in agriculture and business were not encouraged to tread in a changed path."⁵⁵ This is the basic reason for the absence of any leading literary figure or academic genius coming up from among the Syrian Christians before Kuriakose Elias Chavara. The letter to the Prefect of the *Propaganda* by the assembly of Syrian clergy on 5 October 1884 refers to the situation: "There is no one from among the Syrian Christians who have completed college education and secured a degree. There are more than a hundred degree holders among the Jacobites. While there are many lawyers, doctors, and judges in other communities, there is none among us."⁵⁶ Kuriakose Elias Chavara addressed this pathetic condition by taking a historic step to start schools attached to every parish⁵⁷ in order to spread education in the Catholic community.

3.4.2. Contributions of Chavara

Kuriakose Elias Chavara wanted the integral education and consequent uplift of the society in spiritual, social and educational

⁵³Udayamperoor Soonahadōsinte Kānōnakal Session, 111, Decree, 11, cited in T. Chathamparampil and J. Kureethara, "Unique Contributions of Blessed Chavara in Educating the Kerala Society," 122.

⁵⁴Charles Piaget, *Kerala Sabha Pathonpatham Noottāndil*. Kottayam: OIRSI, 1969, 41.

⁵⁵Charles Piaget, *Kerala Sabha Pathonpatham Noottāndil*, 70.

⁵⁶*Archives of Oriental Congregations*. Quoted in Charles Piaget, *Kerala Sabha Pathonpatham Noottāndil*, 103.

⁵⁷*Chronicle of Mannanam*, Vol. 3, 1864-1871, Mannanam: 1880, 90.

spheres.⁵⁸ He used education as an instrument of social progress, not merely for his own community but also for the marginalized section of the society, which was denied any access to the tools of social mobility. The initiatives he took in the field of education originated in his own exceptional personal charisma.⁵⁹ Taking into consideration the social situation of the time, Chavara took admirable steps to raise the living standards of women, Dalits and the downtrodden. By means of education, Chavara enabled them to rise above the clutches of caste system. In 1846, he founded the first Catholic Sanskrit school at Mannanam where he admitted children of all castes and creeds.⁶⁰ It was a unique contribution of Chavara, when schools were mainly intended for the education of *Brahmin* children and village schools functioned for the general education of the non-Brahmins,⁶¹ Chavara allowed and encouraged the children of the low castes to learn Sanskrit at his school at Mannanam. In this respect, he is considered the first reformer in Kerala to break the unjust taboos of caste system and to liberate people from such discriminative system.⁶²

Chavara knew well that the progress of a community greatly depended on the growth from within. So, he launched a process of education at various levels such as theological education and systematic formation of clergy through seminaries and education of children through schools attached to all parishes.⁶³ His educational vision was a vision filled with joy and hope. Its essence is to be a servant of God and lover of his people.⁶⁴ It was a challenging and transformative vision, which brought forth historic revolutions in the society. He became the instrument to a great movement, which picked up momentum and it has been serving humanity through pastoral care, education, health services and media and social apostolates.

⁵⁸K. C. Chacko, *Blessed Father Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Mannanam: The Vice-Postulator, Cause of Fr. Kuriakose Elias, 1986, 61.

⁵⁹J. Kuriedath, *Christianity and Indian Society*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2013, 54.

⁶⁰Valerian, *Malankara Sabha Mathavinte Oru Veera Santhanam*, Mannanam, 1940, 137.

⁶¹A. Sreedhara Menon, *Social and Cultural History of India*, 281.

⁶²Valerian, *Malankara Sabha Mathavinte Oru Veera Santhanam*, 137.

⁶³J. Pathrapankal, "Chavara: A Prophet of Our Times" in *The Lord of Heaven and Earth*, P. Kalluveettil and P. Kochappilly, eds., Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004, 127-134, 130.

⁶⁴J. Pathrapankal, "Chavara: A Prophet of Our Times," 130.

4. Family System

The emergence of the family, with husband and wife as active partners in running it, is a stabilizing feature. The early basic traits of an individual's personality are formed in the family which transmits the cultural heritage to him, and maintains a cultural continuity between him and the society. A child meets with his first experiences and new stimuli in the family. In fact, the influence of the family environment on the child is very deep that it acquires at an early age the personality and character traits visible later in adulthood. Only in a healthy family can social instincts find the basis for growth.⁶⁵ Hence, it is essential to make an analysis of the family system that was prevalent in the nineteenth century Kerala to have a better understanding of the *Chavarul* that he wrote to the families of his parishioners at Kainakari.

4.1. Family and Marriage

Family, the basis of society, is composed of parents and children, and normally it is born in the institution of marriage.⁶⁶ In Kerala, among the *Nayars* and other castes except the *Brahmin*, marriage was not considered to be a sacred alliance as found among the Christians. They enjoyed some freedom in the selection of their mates and in separation. Polygamy was a common practice among the male members of all castes in Kerala.⁶⁷ Though the *Brahmin* women were a privileged class, they were not free from social taboos.⁶⁸ Dowry, polygamy and family traditions were means employed by men to keep them under subjugation.⁶⁹ For this reason, the community in general, welcomed the birth of a girl child without much of a celebration. This discontent is turned into restrictions as the child grew. Her movements, deeds, words and even thoughts were so restricted as to make her life worse than that of a slave.⁷⁰

⁶⁵L. A. Krishna Iyer, *Social History of Kerala*, Vol. 1: *The Pre-Dravidians*, Madras: Book Centre Publications, 1968, 164.

⁶⁶L. A. Krishna Iyer, *Social History of Kerala*, Vol. 1: *The Pre-Dravidians*, 78.

⁶⁷K. K. N. Kurup, *Aspects of Kerala History and Culture*, Trivandrum: College Book House, 1977, 41-43.

⁶⁸R. N. Yesudas, *A History of Women's Education in Kerala*, Trivandrum: South Indian Social Centre, 1988, 18.

⁶⁹Suma Rose, *Polity, Society, and Women: With Special Reference to Travancore 1700-1900*, Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2004, 66.

⁷⁰Suma Rose, *The Polity, Society, and Women*, 66.

The *Brahmins* developed a very specific custom of marriage relation within their caste. In their anxiety to preserve the *Brahmaswam* lands undivided, only the eldest son of the head of the family was permitted to contract an official marriage. The permission was extended to the second son when this was necessary to secure succession. The practice of *sambandham* (concubinage) of the younger siblings of the *Brahmin* family was observed as they entered into relationship with women from the lower castes but not below the *Nayars*. These could not bequeath property to their children or even maintain their family. So, the *Brahmins* introduced strict monogamy for the women. But the men-folk continued polygamy and several other practices prevalent in the other lower castes.⁷¹

In the *Brahmin* society, the marriage of girls immediately after attaining puberty, and even at an earlier age, was very common. According to the custom, a very heavy dowry had to be given to every bridegroom. Hence, the girls of the poor families having no money to be given as dowry suffered from frustration.⁷² Those who were economically less privileged found it impossible to give their maidens in marriage, with the result that they remained unmarried and were eventually ruined.⁷³

Sexual taboos were observed only in the case of women.⁷⁴ They were not free to engage in marriage alliances of their choice. The poor *Brahmin* women were often forced to marry old men and live as co-wives, for the elder son in the *Brahmin* family can have more than one wife. Even teenage girls were given in marriage to old men. As a result, there were many young widows in the *Brahmin illams* (houses). The total denial of education and their social narrow-mindedness made the *Brahmin* women to be totally submissive to their men. They had no opinions and beliefs of their own other than those spelt out by

⁷¹B. Rajeevan, "Cultural Formation of Kerala" in *Essays on the Cultural Formation of Kerala*, P. J. Cherian, ed., Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala State Gazetteers Department, 1999, 9-34, 9.

⁷²W. Logan, *Malabar Manuel*, Vol. 1, 155-156.

⁷³Kumari S. Padma, *Study on the Status and Role of Women in the Public Life of Kerala from 1850-1956*, PhD Dissertation, Thiruvananthapuram: University of Kerala, 2002, 37.

⁷⁴K. S. Padma, *Study on the Status and Role of Women in the Public Life of Kerala*, 38.

their men.⁷⁵ In brief, they had absolutely no right to the property and they had neither legal nor social status in the society.

Among the St Thomas Christians, the marriage is arranged by the parents and not much attention was paid to the wishes of the boy or the girl, and the couple generally met each other for the first time at the time of marriage.⁷⁶ Girls were married at an early age and were given dowry in the form of gold or jewels. The tying of the *tali* was the principal ceremony at the wedding and this is performed in the Church.⁷⁷ Christians are very strictly monogamous. Although widows could remarry, very seldom do widows in a respectable family, with children, think of a second marriage.

4.2. Joint Family System

Joint family system was prevalent in Kerala until recently. Large joint families lived in a common residence was called *taravad*. The property of a *taravad* was the joint property of all descendants of a common ancestress, in the female line only.⁷⁸ The property was the common property of all the members of that particular *taravad*. Partition of property was very rare although it was possible with a mutual agreement between all the members. The eldest male member called *karanavar* managed the common property.

Generally, *Nayars* followed the matriarchal familial system of inheritance called *marumakkattayam* and lived in a joint family. Christians, Muslims, *Brahmins*, majority of *Ezhavas* and tribal castes followed *makkattayam* or patriarchal system of inheritance. However, the *Brahmins* and a few other caste groups also practiced the joint family system. Under the joint family, even the distant relations lived together sharing the fruits of property under the leadership of *karanavar*.⁷⁹

As the property of the joint family would be passed on to the eldest member, the other members would take no interest to develop it.

⁷⁵L. A. Krishna Ayer, *Cochin Tribes and Castes*, Trivandrum: Government Press, 1939, 206.

⁷⁶K. C. Alexander, *Social Mobility in Kerala*. Poona: Deccan College, 1968, 78.

⁷⁷K. C. Alexander, *Social Mobility in Kerala*, 79.

⁷⁸R. Jeffery, *The Decline of Nayar Dominance Society and Politics in Travancore*, 15; C. A. Innes and F. B. Evans, eds., *Malabar Gazetteer*, Vol. I and II, Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Gazetteers, 1997, 98.

⁷⁹V. Mathew Kurian, *The Caste-Class Formation: A Case Study of Kerala*, New Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1986, 8-9.

Moreover, the *karanavar*, in many cases was not keen about the welfare of an estate which would be passed on to the niece or nephew. This attitude affected the prosperity and economic development of the *taravad* negatively. In spite of several advantages of a joint family, often it prevented the development of a nuclear family and the healthy human development there.⁸⁰

The St Thomas Christians who followed the *makkattayam* (patrilineal) system. The father was the head of the family and was called *karanavar*, a title that was given to the eldest male member in the family.⁸¹ All sons inherited their father's property but the daughters were provided with a dowry. In order to keep up their family traditions, if a couple had only female children, they would adopt as their heir a boy related to the father in the male line, and they did not make their daughters heirs to their properties.⁸² Hence, in the patrilineal community, sons were preferred over the daughters. The sons were given preferential treatment, education, etc.⁸³

5. Conclusion

The traditional society of Kerala underwent continuous changes through ages, which brought fundamental reforms in the socio-economic, political and cultural spheres in the state. The activities of social reformers strived to put an end to the social evils such as caste system, untouchability, patriarchal system, etc. through organizational initiations, which aimed at ensuring equality of opportunity in all areas of life. In these social reforms, they attempted to put an end to the evil customs, practices and superstitions that prevailed in the society. To a great extent, they brought radical changes in the basic nature of the traditional society. The attitude of the society towards women also took a positive turn. However, the weaker sections of the society needed more effective measures to improve their pathetic condition.

⁸⁰V. Nagam Aiya, *The Travancore State Manual*, Vol 2, Trivandrum: Government Press, 1906, 364.

⁸¹Jackson John, "Life Style of Kerala Christians." <https://www.nasrani.net/2008/04/15/lifestyle-of-kerala-syrian-christians/> (Accessed on 28.07.2018).

⁸²Scaria Zachariah, ed., *Randu Prachina Gathyakritikal: Udayam Peroor Soonahadosinte Kanonakal A.D. 1599*, Changanassery: The Sandessanilayam Press, 1976, 90. Zachariah, *Randu Prachina Gathyakritikal*, 90.

⁸³K. C. Alexander, *Social Mobility in Kerala*, 77.

The biographical sketch of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara, points to the fact that the formation he received from home and from the seminary, equipped him to have an intense craving for God. As he worked on this desire, it filled him with God experience. He looked at the people with the eyes of God and loved everyone as children of God. This love overflowed through his various innovative contributions such as the indigenous printing technology which catalysed the state's modernisation. He organized the *pidiyari* collection to provide free meals, clothes, and study materials to the students and to give opportunity to the poor and the untouchables to study. He opened a house called *upavisala* for the welfare of the orphans and the destitute. The starting of a Sanskrit school in Mannanam in the late forties was a daring step towards reformation. Yet another daring move was the setting up of schools managed by the parish church.

Chavara was instrumental to giving shape to the indigenous Christian monastic life in Kerala.⁸⁴ This move aimed at the wholesome development of society. He popularised the concept of vocational training among women, thereby, making them self-reliant. He was a literary genius with an incredible range and depth. Chavara liberated Christianity from its cultural and institutional constraints and saved the Church from fragmentation. He popularized vernacular literature and prayers. One of the first vernacular dailies in the country, the *Deepika*, was printed at the press that he established at Mannanam, a daily which acted as a catalyst in bringing social reform throughout the state.

A. Sreedhara Menon, the noted historian and Padma Bhushan awardee, wrote in a note sent to the Department of Research and Documentation, Chavara Hills, Kerala as follows: "I feel sorrow for not having been able to study more deeply about Father Chavara whom I have often met in studying and writing about Kerala history. This note is meant at least in part to remove that sorrow. People like Father Chavara should be given the place they deserve."⁸⁵ Yes, Kuriakose Elias Chavara was a person with an extraordinary measure of spiritual stamina, which he applied in re-energizing the society that led to the

⁸⁴The congregation of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI) was founded at Mannanam in 1831 and the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel (CMC) was founded at Koonammavu in 1866.

⁸⁵A. S. Menon, "A Renewal Leader Who Walked Ahead of Time" in *Chavarayachan: Chavara Birth Bicentenary Special*, Jose Thomas Pattara, ed., Kottayam: Deepika Publications, 2004, 16-20, 19.

rebirth of the Kerala society. The vision with which Chavara initiated the movements has been imbibed by several other leaders who came after him over the years with their own individual endeavours. So much has been done that the Kerala society has been transformed positively beyond recognition over a span of a hundred and eighty years.

Chavara's God orientation was germinated in the family and it grew in his community and finally its effect was felt by the whole Church and the country at large. He has left behind, as his will and testament for the families, a code of conduct and science of good manners that touches various aspects of life. Chavara's vision on the formation of good Christian families is enshrined in his *Chavarul (The Testament of a Loving Father)*.