

KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA: A HARBINGER OF BRIDGING FAITH, JUSTICE AND HUMANITY

Binoy Checkonthayil CMI*

Abstract: Kuriakose Elias Chavara was a visionary whose life and mission exemplified the harmonious integration of faith, justice and humanity. His contributions transcended the boundaries of religion, inspiring transformative change in education, social justice, and spiritual renewal. His early exposure to socio-economic inequality influenced Chavara's determination to combat structural injustices and support the underprivileged. His efforts established the groundwork for a society based on compassion, equality and collective well-being. One of Chavara's greatest accomplishments was his innovative contribution to education where he promoted comprehensive education at a time when caste and class barriers restricted the access to education by founding the first Catholic school in Mannanam, and mandating every church to have a school of its own. Children from various backgrounds received schooling due to this revolutionary programme, which led to the high literacy rate in Kerala. The activities of Chavara exemplified his belief in the integration of spirituality with active service, creating a legacy of holistic

* **Binoy Checkonthayil** is a religious priest belonging to the Congregation of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI) in the Syro-Malabar Church. He holds M. Phil. from Christ University, Bengaluru and Doctorate in Psychology from Nagpur University. He also holds M.A. and M. Ed. in Sociology. He teaches Psychology in Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram and is a Visiting faculty at Darsana Institute of Philosophy, Wardha. In Ohio, USA, he worked as a teaching assistant. He has been the Principal of the BJM Carmel Academy, CBSE Senior Higher Secondary School in Chandrapur. He is a motivational speaker. Binoy is the author of the book, *Mentally Retarded Children: Stress and Coping Resources among Indian Mothers* published by Scholars Press, London. Email: binoycmi@gmail.com

Christian living. The central message of Chavara's life was the promotion of human dignity. His teachings on family values, ethical living and the interconnectedness of humanity continue to resonate even today, offering a blueprint for addressing the contemporary challenges. Chavara's ideology hold profound relevance in today's world, where inequality, social fragmentation and environmental degradation prevail. His model of inclusive education, advocacy for social justice and emphasis on solidarity offer enduring lessons to build up a more equitable and compassionate society. Chavara is a beacon of hope, who reminds us faith, justice and humanity are inextricably linked together in the pursuit of a better world.

Keywords: Kuriakose Elias Chavara, Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, Indian Spirituality, Social Reform, Spiritual Renewal, Faith, Justice, Human dignity

1. Introduction

Kuriakose Elias Chavara holds an outstanding place in the socio-religious history of Kerala, India. Renowned for his pioneering contributions to education, social reform and spiritual renewal, he stands as a symbol of the harmonious confluence of faith, justice and humanity.¹ He represents the peaceful union of justice, humanity and faith. His life and actions demonstrated a deep dedication to human dignity, equality and compassion, the values that are essential requirement for the wellbeing in a society. Chavara is a symbol of revolutionary transformation at a time of caste-based hierarchies, illiteracy and social injustices; for his legacy transcends the ecclesiastical sphere and penetrates deeply into the societal fabric.² Chavara saw that faith loses its core when it is separated from justice and the well-being of others. Therefore, he wholeheartedly dedicated his life to promote inclusivity, uplift the underprivileged and fight for a more just and equitable society. The present paper is an attempt to explore the role of Kuriakose Elias Chavara as a harbinger of bridging faith, justice and humanity.

¹ Soja Maria, *Kuriakose Elias Chavara and the Educational Renaissance*, (TSSC 12), Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2023, 65-78.

² P.V. Mollykutty, "St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara: A Unique and Vibrant Educational Visionary of Kerala," *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research* 3, 2 (2015), 279-287.

2. Pioneering Educational Reforms

Chavara, as a pioneer of educational reforms in Kerala, bequeaths an enduring legacy to the posterity. His ground-breaking initiatives in the 19th century were rooted in his deep conviction that education is a powerful tool for social transformation and individual empowerment. Desjardins³ has well attested the power of education and social transformation. In an era when education was a privilege of the elite and largely inaccessible to the marginalized communities, Chavara introduced revolutionary measures to democratize the learning and bridge in societal disparities. He promoted universal education, when access to the school was a privilege only of the wealthy and the powerful ones. In 1846, he established the first Catholic Sanskrit school at Mannanam, allowing the children of all castes and creeds to receive education. His conviction that education is the key to the advancement and empowerment of the society served as the foundation for this action. In order to ensure that education reach even the remotest areas of Kerala, he also introduced *pallikudams*, or *schools associated with churches*. As a result, Kerala became one of the most literate states in India.⁴

Chavara's educational reforms were not limited to expanding access to education but were focused on extending quality education. He promoted an all-encompassing strategy that combined academic success with moral and spiritual principles.⁵ In his writings and instructions, Chavara emphasized character development, moral behaviour and practice of virtues, and he ensured that education produced well-rounded people who could make valuable contributions to the society. His emphasis on vernacular education was yet another noteworthy initiative. Chavara promoted the use of Malayalam, the native language, as a teaching medium during a period when formal education was in Sanskrit and other languages. The initiative of Chavara fostered a sense of cultural pride and identity in addition to making education more accessible to the general public. In order to fight ignorance and poverty, he promoted adult education among the elderly.

³ Richard Desjardins, "Education and Social Transformation," *European Journal of Education* 50 (2015), 239-244.

⁴ Rosetta, "Chavara - A Champion of Education," *Herald of the East* 11, 2 (2015), 285-298.

⁵ Jessy Therese, "Transformation Through Education," *Vinayasadhana* 9, 2 (2018), 43-50.

Chavara not only established schools but also implemented novel practices like the noon-meal, which encouraged the attendance of the children from the poor families. He founded the first Catholic printing press in Kerala, which was essential to the spread of knowledge and the advancement of literacy. Chavara's purpose of social justice and human dignity was closely linked to his educational innovations where he aimed at the improvement of the entire communities by empowering the individuals with education, and reducing disparities and promoting solidarity. His vision and efforts have left an indelible mark on Kerala's educational landscape, earning for him recognition as one of the foremost architects of literacy and social progress.

Today, Chavara's legacy continues to inspire educational institutions and social initiatives worldwide. His life serves as a testament to the transformative power of education and the enduring impact of visionary leadership. His unwavering commitment to inclusivity, equality and human development underscores the timeless relevance of his mission in addressing contemporary challenges in education and society. Chavara's emphasis on education extended beyond academics. He recognized the transformative power of moral and spiritual education in shaping individuals and communities. By integrating faith-based values with formal education, he sought to create a generation of responsible and compassionate citizens. His vision of 'enlightenment through education' not only uplifted countless individuals but also laid the foundation for Kerala's remarkable achievements in literacy and social development.

3. Advocate of Social Justice

Many people honour Chavara as a social activist who dedicated his life to address social injustices and to uplift the underprivileged groups. Addressing the urgent social inequalities of his day was the focus of Chavara's life and ministry, which were rooted in a strong sense of faith and directed by a vision of human dignity. His efforts demonstrated his strong belief that religion must motivate action, promoting equality and harmony in a culture tainted by ignorance, poverty and caste prejudice. Chavara bravely opposed such polarizing practices during a time when caste systems governed social and economic structures. He fought to establish inclusive environments in the Church and society and

promoted the dignity of every person, regardless of caste or creed.⁶ Chavara provided education to the children from various backgrounds, challenging the rigid caste-based exclusions of the time. His institutions became melting pots of diversity, nurturing an environment of equality and mutual respect. By advocating for education as a fundamental human right, Chavara empowered the oppressed ones to set themselves free from the cycles of poverty and subjugation. Scaria and Joseph⁷ highlight the legacy of Chavara as a social reformer.

Recognizing the transforming power of education in empowering women, Chavara gave priority on the role of women in the society. He took initiative to educate and empower women, encouraging them to actively participate in the domestic and social life, in a patriarchal society where they were frequently denied of the opportunities for advancement. Chavara's treatment of the sick, impoverished and disenfranchised was a crucial component of his social activities to ensure justice. His altruistic endeavours, such as the founding of care homes and orphanages, demonstrated his profound empathy for the people who were marginalized in the society. He viewed the service to the needy as an expression of divine love, and he inspired the others to do the same. His interventions addressed not only the immediate needs but also systemic barriers, and created sustainable pathways for the empowerment of the disadvantaged groups.

4. Reformer of Religious Life

Chavara was a transformative reformer of religious life in the 19th century India, leaving a profound impact on the spiritual and ecclesiastical landscape of Kerala. As a co-founder of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI), the first indigenous religious congregation in India and a spiritual visionary, he reshaped the practice of religious life, emphasizing discipline, community living and service to the society. His reforms were rooted in deep understanding of faith and commitment to fostering holiness and social engagement among the clergy and laity alike. Chavara recognized the challenges faced by the Church during his time, including laxity in religious observance, lack of focus on education

⁶ A.M. Davis, "Re-visiting St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara - a Forgotten Social Reformer of 19th Century Kerala," *International Journal for Innovative Research in Multidisciplinary Field* 7, 5 (2021), 33-38.

⁷ Manjula Scaria, and Binoy Joseph, "The Legacy of Kuriakose Elias Chavara as a Social Reformer," *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications* 5, 7 (2015), 01-05.

and social service and the absence of indigenous leadership. To address these challenges, he introduced innovative reforms that aimed at revitalizing the spiritual and pastoral life of the clergy and the religious communities. He emphasized the importance of regular prayer, meditation and the sacraments, encouraging a disciplined lifestyle that integrated spiritual growth and active service. Kochumuttam highlights the spirituality of Chavara through various stages like Withdrawn Life (*Vana-Vāsa*), House of Vision (*Darśana*) and Austerity (*Tapas*), Life in Solitude (*Otunki Pārkkal*), Life in Silence (*Miṇṭ-Atakkamāyi*) and House on Hilltop (*Bes-Rauma*).⁸

The formation of religious organizations that integrated spirituality with social outreach was at the heart of his vision. Under his leadership, the CMI congregation developed itself into a model of religious life that skilfully combined missionary fervour with monastic contemplation. In addition to receiving theological education, members also received practical training that prepared them to meet the community’s social and educational needs. Chavara worked hard to keep the Syro-Malabar Church united at a period of struggles and difficulties. His diplomatic and pastoral interventions helped to resolve the conflicts and strengthen the Church’s identity and mission. His writings, especially, the spiritual and pastoral letters, provided guidance on living a Christ-centred life and inspired the faithful and the clergy to develop a deeper commitment to faith.

Chavara’s emphasised the active involvement of the religious communities in social welfare and education. According to Chavara, religious life is a way to help the larger community, especially the underprivileged and disenfranchised. He was convinced that religious life should be a source of hope and social change by taking the initiative to open schools, orphanages, and care home facilities. He broadened the scope of religious life to outside the cloister. Chavara’s conception of religious life was profoundly spiritual and based on the transformational potential of love and service. His emphasis on unity, discipline and active engagement in the lives of the people continues to influence the religious and spiritual practices of the Church. As a reformer of religious life, Chavara’s legacy endures as a testament to his extraordinary ability,

⁸ Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, (TSSC 1), Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2017, 81-91.

which inspires the generations to merge faith with action, and to live lives of holiness and service.

5. A Legacy of Humanity and Compassion

Chavara's life was truly a legacy of humanity and compassion, for the focus of his life and ministry was on elevating others and his selfless services made him a beacon of humanity and compassion. His achievements as a visionary, social reformer, and spiritual leader went beyond religious context to meet the urgent needs of the society. With an unshakable faith, Chavara dedicated his life to promote equality, love, and service, and left behind a legacy that serves as a source of inspiration and direction. Chavara's outlook on life was characterized by compassion. He knew the hardships of the impoverished, the sick, the orphaned, and the marginalized, and he dedicated his life for their wellbeing. His numerous initiatives, including the establishment of orphanages, homes for the destitute and care homes for the elderly, reflected his deep-seated belief in the dignity and worth of every individual. For him, the acts of kindness and service were expressions of divine love and he inspired those around him to adopt a similar outlook. Scaria and Joseph⁹ observe Chavara as a harbinger of human dignity and identifies the steps he had taken to imprint this ideology in the minds of people.

Chavara was determined to combat social inequality by promoting inclusive education, for he understood that ignorance and illiteracy were the main causes of social inequality. He dismantled prejudices and promoted harmony by establishing schools that welcomed the students from all communities and castes. He also placed a high priority on girls' education since he knew that free, strong and educated women could bring in development in the communities and families. These initiatives depict his concern and compassion for the humanity, which empowered them for a better future. Chavara's goal also included promotion of harmony and unity in divided communities. He was a staunch advocate of interfaith dialogue and communal solidarity, working to build bridges between different social and religious groups. His emphasis on moral and spiritual education underscored the importance of character formation, encouraging the individuals to live in integrity, humility and

⁹ Manjula Scaria and Binoy Joseph, "St. Chavara: A Harbinger of Human Dignity," *International Journal of Recent Research in Social Sciences and Humanities*, 2, 2 (2015), 195-200.

a sense of responsibility towards others. His focus on the family as the cornerstone and cradle of the society highlights his all-encompassing theory of human growth. He promoted solid family ties, moral education and spiritual growth of the children, for he firmly believed they were necessary for building up compassionate and equitable societies. His lessons on family values are relevant today, as they give direction for dealing with today's social issues.

6. Personal Inspiration and Enlightenment

Chavara is a radiant beacon of inspiration for those who are called to the priesthood, embodying a life of unwavering faith, selfless service and transformative leadership. His life as a priest and the founder of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate is a testament to his unwavering devotion to both God and the people, and it should serve as an inspiration to everyone aspiring to pursue such a way of life. Chavara's life is a perfect example of the priestly vocation, which combines practical involvement with spiritual strength to meet societal needs. Those who aspire to devote their lives to God and the humanity get inspired by his deep relationship with God in prayer. The depth of his spirituality was such that he could integrate it into every aspect of his ministry enabling him to lead a contemplative and action-oriented life. He set an example of how a priest could be a motive force for social change, especially through the ministry of education, and making it accessible to the underprivileged. One gets inspired by Chavara's dedication to raise the oppressed and strengthen the communities, which embodies the core of Christ's mission.

Chavara could strike a balance between his spiritual obligations and imaginative leadership. Through his life and ministry, Chavara demonstrated, in addition to the sacramental administration, the priesthood has the responsibility to organize and guide the communities towards holistic development. Chavara's writings demonstrate his deep understanding of human needs and his persistent commitment to promoting moral and spiritual development. They provide spiritual insights and practical advice to lead an authentic Christian life. Chavara had a profound sense of humility and selflessness. Despite his remarkable achievements, he remained deeply rooted in his faith and devoted to serving others. He taught that priesthood is conferred upon a chosen one not for his personal glory but to surrender oneself to God's will and work tirelessly to realize it in one's life and that of others.

Therefore, it is essential to embrace the gift of priesthood with a pure heart and a spirit of generosity.

7. Relevance in Today's World

Chavara remains highly relevant in today's world for his transformative contributions to education, social justice, and religious life. His life and work continue to inspire the individuals and communities, particularly in the context of global challenges such as educational inequality, poverty, and the violence against human dignity. Chavara dedicated his life to the service of God and the humanity, and his spiritual vision transcended the boundaries of religion, laying the foundation for social change rooted in education and empowerment. At a time when education was primarily reserved for the elite, he envisioned a society where education was accessible to all, irrespective of caste, creed, or gender. His establishment of schools and support for the formation of an educated populace marked a significant departure from prevailing social norms. His visionary approach was evident in his advocacy for the education of girls, which was almost unheard in the 19th century. In today's context, as the world grapples with educational disparities, Chavara's efforts serve as bright glimpses of hope for educational reform and social equity.

Chavara's commitment to social justice and the rights and dignity of the oppressed remain relevant in the present struggles for equality and human rights. By opposing the harsh caste system and fighting for the rights of the Dalits and other marginalized groups, he became a champion for the cause of the oppressed. In the present world burdened with environmental degradation, social unrest and the erosion of moral standards, Chavara's legacy has a deep impact as it urges us to work for a just and peaceful society. Chavara's life and teachings serve as a timely reminder of the necessity of education, social justice and spirituality in fostering a just and compassionate world. His vision of inclusive education provides a framework for resolving educational inequalities, promoting social equality and to take initiatives to stop various sorts of discriminations. In an era marked by individualism and fragmentation, Chavara's emphasis on community, solidarity and service offers a paradigm that emphasizes interconnectedness and collective responsibility. In short, his life exemplifies the transformative potential of integrating faith with action, providing a roadmap for addressing contemporary challenges with compassion and integrity.

8. Chavara: A Missing Page of Kerala History

Chavara's life and contributions constitute an important chapter that connects Kerala's cultural revival, social reform and spirituality in the 19th century. Although political movements and socio-religious reforms are frequently highlighted in Kerala history, the pivotal role of Chavara in forming its educational, social and spiritual landscape is still not recognized or highlighted as he deserves. Sheeba¹⁰ also opined that Chavara was a missing page of Kerala history. Chavara's efforts to give access for all to education, irrespective of gender or caste, was a watershed in Kerala's history and it helped to create an inclusive and literate society. Chavara was a visionary leader and social reformer whose actions went beyond traditional religious responsibilities. He defended the dignity of the less privileged during a period when caste-based discrimination and social injustices were prevalent.

In addition to his educational reforms, Chavara played a pivotal role in fostering communal harmony and spiritual growth. His literary contributions, such as his testament to the Christian families, reflect his deep concern for moral values and community welfare. The cultural fabric of Kerala was greatly enhanced by his attempts to spread Malayalam language and literature through his spiritual writings and translations and thereby ensuring that his message reached the general public. His cultural vision places him in the company of other notable figures in Kerala history whose contributions influenced community's communal consciousness in addition to their individual accomplishments. His works are not limited to religious settings, which obscures his wider influence on social justice, education, and cultural advancement. Recognizing and integrating his legacy into the historical discourse of Kerala is essential to have a comprehensive understanding of the history of the state. Chavara's life serves as a reminder that history is not only shaped by political figures but also by individuals whose spiritual and social vision transforms the societies in profound and lasting ways.

9. Conclusion

Chavara is one of the outstanding examples that we identify how faith may spur social change and unite the domains of justice and humanity.

¹⁰ Sheeba C.V., "Chavara Kuriakose Elias: A Missing Page of Kerala History," *Psychology And Education* 58, 2 (2021), 7739-7742.

Chavara put his beliefs and conviction into practice and it resulted in steadfast dedication to spiritual principles and ceaseless attempts to alleviate social injustices and support underprivileged groups. Chavara as an agent of renovation and change in Kerala throughout the 19th century made immense contributions in the field of education, ensuring human dignity of all and the promotion of moral and spiritual development. His life and legacy offer lessons on service and compassion that cut across religious barriers. In a world still grappling with disparities and the erosion of moral values, Chavara's vision and mission continue to resonate, inspiring the individuals and communities to build up a more just, humane and harmonious society. The life of Chavara served as an example of the effectiveness of faith in action. He changed the socio-cultural environment of his era as a harbinger of bringing faith, justice and humanity together, bequeathing a legacy that serves as an inspiration and provides direction for all times. Chavara continues to be a ray of hope, inspiring the generations to create a more compassionate and just world by living up to the values of love, service and dignity.