

## **Saint Chavara- The Herald of Modern Catholic Education**

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### *Abstract*

St. Chavara was a herald who defined education not only for his contemporaries but for the forthcoming generations. The paper looks into Chavara's perspectives of education with special emphasis on higher education in a Catholic outlook and the different steps through which Chavara's education vision became visible in the history of India. The vision became possible through a band of enlightened leaders, systematic education and spiritual development programmes for priests, use of the printing press, spreading knowledge through creative writings, the establishment of a Sanskrit school, women empowerment through education, and with the establishment of universities and integral education which blends secular sciences and spiritual sciences. Catholic higher education centres provide opportunities for people of all faith or atheists to take benefit from the curricular and co-curricular educational

programs, individual support, and Christian spirit which our varied Catholic institutions provide.

*Keywords.* Catholic education centres, Women Empowerment

## **Introduction**

Education is undergoing a transition in this world of fast development with day by day explosion of knowledge and outburst of technology. Modern generation is digital citizens and they are highly immersed in the advancement of social networking accustomed to technological development. The new technological and social advancement demand a corresponding change in all areas of human life and hence necessitates a redefining and a new outlook of education. In this era of redefining of education, this paper presents St. Chavara as a herald who defined education not only for his contemporaries in the nineteenth century but also for the forthcoming generations. The title is being expanded in the higher education perspective of our experiences in the field.

## **Redefining Education**

The essence of education is to facilitate understanding each one's inner self, potentialities, and possible horizons of development so that he or she could be properly prepared to face the challenges in life and make the best out of life (Chackalackal, 2013). That is to say, the character formation of the individuals and their commitment to bring about development and transformation in society are the basic fruit of education in general. According to Gurnal Myrdal as quoted by Banu:

Education has an independent as well as instrumental value, i.e., the purpose of education must be to rationalize attitudes as well as to impart knowledge and skills. Educational development should aim at training the young generation the life skills, self-reliance, personality development, community service social integration and political understanding (Banu, 2012).

“You have not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished! Look to the future, where the Spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things” (VC, 110). These words of Late Pope John Paul II in the apostolic exhortation of Consecrated life are very relevant and meaningful when we turn to the glorious annals of historical analysis of Indian education. The revelations of past and the dreams and plans of future are equally important as what we the educators do with regard to the shaping of higher education today.

The higher education in India seeks to cultivate new knowledge through means of meticulous and undaunted quest for the truth and reality that would enable to interpret and analyze all knowledge and beliefs through the perspective of novel discoveries. With an aim to provide an appropriate code of professional conduct, professional expertise, and leadership in all walks of life; foster quality and social justice, it also seeks to integrate values among teachers and students which would by far have a widespread influence over the society. Owing to the vast cultural heritage and legacy that make up the edifice of our country, Indian higher education encourages constructivist knowledge with special prominence on the unity of scientific and spiritual pursuits that would reemploy and manifest this cultural legacy with a worldwide objective of unifying the globe as one united and cohesive family.

But in reality, today higher education is mainly seen as ‘commercial product to be sold and purchased like any other consumer goods’. A market system has entered into the university campus which was traditionally considered a temple of knowledge, along with privatization of higher education (Higher Education and Privatization, 2004; Chackalackal, 2013). The rise of an information-based economy, the tidal wave of new enrolments coming to higher education and the state lacks the capacity on existing campuses to accommodate the increase in enrolment give rise to privatization. A typical business culture crept in the service sector of education which had assumed sanctity in the olden times. Market-driven principles in education became a measuring tool even for traditional education institutions, to fit into the competitive market system. Here, finance becomes the quality determinant factor. As a result, higher education in society becomes mostly motivated and driven by economic benefits. The content and method of education of young minds seem to be taking the same route, the fallout being the adverse impact upon human and intellectual formation that comes through a long process of being initiated into the culture and values evolving from the life lived by humanity all through the history. In short the classical understanding of education ie, *Educare*, that is “to lead out, from within is found lost, to the present education system (Chackalackal, 2013). It does not promote any inner-transformation, and social transformation in turn; rather getting focused on personal financial gains.

As this paper is an attempt to dwell upon Chavara's perspectives of education with special emphasis on higher education in a Catholic outlook, a short description of Catholic education is essential.

### **Catholic Education**

Catholic higher education institutions can never be away from the sense of mission of uncompromising witness to the Gospel. Strong Catholic identity and fidelity to the mission are essential. According to Pope Francis Catholic, higher education centres must be "uncompromising witness... to the Church's moral teaching" and to resist efforts, from whatever quarter, to dilute that indispensable witness (Pope Francis, 2014). Not only to preserve the Catholic identity but also to defend and advance in Catholic identity must be specific to Catholic higher education. The over-influence of secular values and interference of government policies had reduced the vigour Catholic institutions to fulfil its sense of mission, but to recover such vision and vitality is more focused in recent years.

It is reality that the earnestness and increasing interest of parents to send their children to Catholic institutions today is not because of the spiritual atmosphere or practice but only due to their academic credentials and also to feel proud of sending their children to esteemed institution so that it may increase their chance of getting admitted in well-known institutions for higher education. Morey and Piderit (2006), expressing the crisis of Catholic higher education, points out that it is the duty of our institutions to create an atmosphere where people all religions should feel appreciation towards Catholic traits and traditions. It is possible only by upholding the moral teachings of the church through its higher education institutions and Universities.

Catholic education institutions are to be rooted in the steadfast promise to truth not only in personal level but in arduous and demonstrated scientific research of the utmost quality, to cater to knowledge through developing skills in critical thinking that can empower prospective leaders dedicated to universal Christian values and to serve the global common good.

They become promoters of higher learning to safeguard the earth our common home through their research endeavours as well as in daily practices, as per the vision and principles manifested by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si* (2015). Apart from the care for the planet, as Catholic educators, we are bound to include our concern for the poor

and commitment for the integral development of humanity within our research projects, our educational curricula and public programming, our institutional infrastructures, policies and practices, and our political and social involvements as colleges and universities. The true spirit of Catholic education fosters openness towards national and international dialogues through institutional engagements and exchange programmes. Pope Francis exhorts the Christian higher education institutions to uphold Catholic social traditions and work for social justice through dedicated service using all the resources and energies. Pope exhorts: “Until greater progress is made in developing widely accessible sources of renewable energy, it is legitimate to choose the lesser of the two evils or to find short-term solutions” *Laudato Si* (2015).

In the analysis of the Catholic identity of the Catholic colleges and Universities, the emphasis in US National directory on catechesis formulated in 2005 is worth considering. It specifies the role of Catholic education as follows:

Catholic Schools are vital to the Church’s mission of evangelization and catechesis. They exist in order to educate the whole person: mind, body, and soul. They present the totality of the Catholic faith. Whether Catholic schools are part of a parish structure or are regional, diocesan, or private, growth in the Catholic faith for the children and young people who attend them is essential to their identity and purpose (USCCB, 2005).

Christian education gives special emphasis on character formation and self-reliance in order to bring transformation and development into the Society. Some western studies show that Catholic identity is less reflected in the institutions due to the decreased number of vowed religious. It reduces the opportunities for the teachers and leaders at the helm to imbibe the spiritual values by osmosis (Morey & Piderit, 2006). The study also shows that many institutions are not in a position to define its Catholic identity and Catholic culture in the higher education context. So they fail to infuse the Catholic culture through the institutions to the students as well as to faculty members and so also to parents and society.

Groome (1996) puts the fundamental function of Catholic school as, “to educate the very ‘being’ of . . . students, to inform, form, and transform their identity and agency—who they are and how they live—with the meaning and ethics of Christian faith” Pope John Paul II,

urged Catholic universities to consecrate “without reserve to the cause of truth” and to proclaim “the meaning of truth” by reference to Jesus as “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (John Paul II, 1990). He exhorted to universities to grow and renew in two ways: as Universities as well as Catholic Universities. According to him all aspects of University life, culture, programs and administration should be an instrument of good news to all.

Though Catholic higher education centres are expected to keep their Catholic identity, we provide opportunities for people of all faith or atheists to take benefit from the curricular and co-curricular educational programs, individual support, and Christian spirit which our varied Catholic institutions provide. The educational prospects provided by Catholic colleges and universities are a class apart to those who desire to utilize them in wanting to develop one’s calibre. In general, all Catholic institutions of higher learning provide a secular education of excellent quality without compromising on gospel values. These sums up to the fact that higher educational Catholic institutions provide a secular ambience, conducive to learning and are in tune with the Gospel values. They focus on the importance of developing students’ moral character and personal values. Faculty at Catholic colleges exceed faculty in all other types of institutions in acknowledging that their institutions place a high priority on promoting students religious/spiritual development (Religion and Education, 2006, 64-90).

Apart from providing more research opportunities and community service programmes, Catholic institutions provide spiritual, sacramental and ministerial support. In other words, Catholic education centres are expected to be informative as well as performative. They must be aware of social issues and concepts of social justice. In short, the Catholic community services must make the individuals and society better.

In the Catholic higher education scenario of the modern world, how St. Chavara an educationist cum social reformer of nineteenth-century remains an inspiring force for a group of educators and leaders of two congregations and in turn, Catholic world at large is the focus of the study. In this regard who is the person of Chavara, what are his educational contributions, and how he became a herald of Catholic education are questions to be addressed now.

## **The Person of St. Chavara**

St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara was born on the 10<sup>th</sup> February 1805 at Kainakari in Kerala and passed away on third of January 1871. By his sixty-five remarkable years of life, he became a permanent and powerful inspiring force that re-vitalized the church and society of his time. A serious study of the life and activities of St. Chavara helps to add many adjectives to this unique personality. A passionate humanist, an enthusiastic visionary, ardent educator and vibrant social reformer, very calculative finance manager etc. are some of them. He is a living flame that strengthens us today as in the past through the active inducement that enriches the culture, and a stimulating spirit that renews the manifold spheres of our daily life, even after 148 years after his passing away from this world of activity.

Though he only had primary education of his time, his mind was broad to learn everything he had seen, heard and experienced in his personal life and from the society in which he lived. What challenged him most at that time was his awareness that ‘a lot of good had been missing in the society, in the absence of learned and enlightened persons.’ The society was gripped in numerous consequences of ignorance and fragmentation. So St. Chavara dared to change the situation of the time through his personal and joint ventures. He with his colleagues decided to make it fertile with abundant fruits in all fields of life through their good works. It is in selecting the kind of ‘good works’ and the manner of doing them, we discover the unique kind of creativity or innovativeness in Chavara (Kuriyathu, 2015). That’s why one can find that Chavara’s life was a solution to the numerous problems to the society of his time as well as today.

There are many people in the world who do great things through their educational expertise, from shared experiences with high intellectuals and great personalities of the contemporary world. Unlike them, from the spiritual strength, he actualized his numerous endeavours fruitfully and effectively, and thus laid a strong foundation for modern society of Kerala. It is something very unique to St. Chavara. He was a dedicated teacher, a relentless social reformer, a talented organizer, a true visionary, a gifted poet, a multi-linguist, a proven orator, an imaginative media person, a playwright and, above all, compassion and kindness incarnate. All these were merged in his persona while successfully striving to shape his modest personal life to match perfectly with what he believed was the ideal model ordained by God for men on earth.

## **Chavara a Man of Divine Wisdom**

An analytical journey through the annals of nineteenth-century Kerala as well as the life and activities of St. Chavara will admire his wisdom, indomitable spirit and multifaceted personality.

The socio-cultural background of nineteenth-century reveals that it was a disjointed society in the name of caste, colour, and gender. There he became a man of action with his creative and innovative plan of action. In an uncivilized land of ignorance, superstition, and division, with a short span of life, he produced revolutions of the amazing kind which ordinary humans could do only through centuries. The secret his success is identified as a divine vision that is an intense God experience. For him, God was everything, his breathing air, food, and drink all he found in his divine master. His prayer life was continual and unending. In short, the source of wisdom, enthusiasm for committed action, and the attitude unbreakable devotion were the outcome of perfect communion with God. His commitment to God, in turn, sanctified and enriched the whole Church and society. The spiritual power radiated around him and inspired many people of his time and this spiritual power was guiding light and motive force behind all his life and activities. Kuriedathu describes it following words:

Chavara reformed and reconstructed the Kerala society, but chiefly through spiritual empowerment, which he garnered for himself and for the society through his constant and intimate relationship with God, and the channelling of the same into the various socio-cultural needs. For him, his pioneering steps were not merely for social reconstruction, but more importantly for the building of a society that can be truly called the kingdom of God (Kuriedathu, 2015).

## **The Good Works Realized by St. Chavara**

If St. Chavara lamented for the missing of good in the society, he himself tried to become an embodiment of good in the society which he had been dreamt of. In a world of ignorance and inhumanness, St. Chavara was a self-learned man and became a signpost or shining star through his intellectual acumen, practical knowledge, social concern and divine wisdom. He precipitated a vibrant culture in the religious-social arenas, especially in the field of education. He supported the poor and needy and established the first charity house of Kerala at Kainakari so that poor old people can live and die in human dignity. So Mannarathara (2017) writes that St. Chavara was a pioneer on many

fronts. He was a litterateur, a torchbearer in the theatre movement, a frontiersman of mass literacy initiatives including setting up of a Sanskrit school for the masses, a promoter of novelty who introduced print technology and successfully operated a press. He was also an environmental conservationist. He was a true secularist and nationalist whose activities reached every section of society irrespective of caste, creed or religion. He was a harbinger of the change that the society of his times was waiting for, and he successfully infused into Christianity the spirit of Indian culture.

Among the many initiatives of St. Chavara, his educational contributions with a special emphasis on Catholic education and its fast progress till today are of special concern in this paper, it will be dealt in detail in the subsequent pages.

### **St. Chavara – A Visionary Educationist**

St. Chavara was a person of ‘good from within and always searching for good around’. He was committed to making his society transformed. He learned from the surroundings and from the experiences other learned people. His innovative spirit prompted him to experiment with the good he perceived in and around. According to him, there should be leaders of knowledge and spiritual enlightenment for the betterment of the society. St. Chavara realized that the basic cause of the predicament of his society is ignorance and hence education is the best tool for the social transformation. From his personal proficiencies and readings, he observed that intellectual and spiritual blindness is interrelated. Enlightenment can make a person wise, so also real learning can make a person spiritual. He feared that intellectual blindness may make a person spiritually blind. These realizations made him a man of incessant action to make transformed society. People who knew him said that he was a Karma Yogi, who worked for the good of the people without expecting any reward, purely inspired from within. Programmes for spiritual and intellectual development were his focus of action. According to Kachappilly, ‘through wisdom towards wisdom’ is a kernel of St. Chavara’s education vision. Through his prophetic foresight and ingenious mission, Chavara spearheaded path-breaking social changes as a pioneering educationist, with prompt initiatives and strategies.

His concern for human beings and society are originated from a divine vision. The one who sees God in oneself recognizes the same God in

others too. Such was the experience of St. Chavara. In his poetical writing *Atmanutapam* (Compunction of a soul), he expresses his deep desire to see God. The vision he got at the beginning of his life is never lost; instead got expanded from within to the other human beings at large. This God realization energized him to be with the heart and hands of a *Karmayogi* (Mollykutty & Thomas, 2015). Though the educational institutions established by St. Chavara and his followers today are enormous in number, spanning all corners of the globe, it, however, need not signify the fruition of his mission. This mission could be complete when the novel thought process he instilled into the consciousness of the society acknowledges and transcends the vital role that education contributes to its holistic development and progress.

He, in fact, had brought light to many lives when he was alive. In the process of beginning of a Sanskrit school, the educational vision of St. Chavara is getting precipitated in the minds of people. They are: his desire to increase secular education level of people of the time (Book of Consultation, 1864), aspiration for development of the society (Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent I, 2002), desire to overcome cast system (Valerian 1938), to see humans as God's children without any distinction, his attempts to search for the best teacher though it costed much time energy and expense, his own personal interest to educate himself utilizing every obtained opportunity (Parapuram, p. 1474-1475; Valerian, 1938).

The following sections describe the different steps through which St. Chavara's education vision became visible in the history of India.

### **A Band of Enlightened Leaders**

Spiritually enlightened people, in turn, would be able to enrich the society, he had visualised. So the first step to actualizing these dreams was the establishment of religious congregations for men and women. So on 11th May 1831, the congregation of CMI was founded at Mannanam in Kerala, in collaboration with Fr. Thomas Palackal, and Fr. Thomas Porukara (Mundadan, 2008). After the demise of both the fathers Palackal (1841) and Porukara (1846), the leadership of the new order was on the shoulder of Chavara (Valerian, 1938).

Being a visionary leader of the society, Chavara could realize that the stability and sanctity of families depend mostly on well-groomed women in society (Kadenkavil, 2004). He was also conscious of the social taboos which had tied up nineteenth-century women. Targeting

at the development of women, as a prudent and effective CEO, St. Chavara with the help of Fr. Leopold Beccarro OCD – the then Carmelite missionary delegate of Kerala - founded CMC the first indigenous women congregation of Syro Malabar Church, on 13th February 1866. The same congregation became the mother congregation for two daughter congregations of Congregation of Mother of Carmel and Congregation of Theresian Carmelites.

St. Chavara earnestly desired that these two congregations of CMI and CMC should take leadership for the spiritual developmental programmes and educational endeavours. St. Chavara's letters and chronicles witness to these twine ideals.

### **Systematic Education for Priests**

Systematic education and spiritual development programmes for priests were the second priority got realised through the mastermind of St. Chavara and companions. To equip priests and sisters and through them to equip the entire society, was the plan of St. Chavara. So immediately after the foundation of the monastery, a seminary for priestly formation and systematic education of priests was had been initiated and thus the first Syro Malabar seminary got inaugurated at Mannanam in 1833. He was convinced that there should be good models for people to follow. The growth and welfare of the Church could materialise only through well-educated and well-trained priests with spiritual depth, ethical uprightness, and good communication skills (Kaniampampil, 2004). Had been aware of the drawbacks of priestly formation given by local individual priests at local centres, he aimed at a holistic formation of priests rooted in the Indian culture through seminary formation. St. Chavara in his circular clearly records about the curriculum:

The languages, Malayalam, Tamil, Latin, Syriac, etc., shall be taught in the first part of the seminary. After completing it, those students who feel called to study for priesthood shall be taught the sacred sciences and ordained priests in the course of time. If we make this a reality and send our students to such a seminary they will certainly be able to perform the duties of their divine 'call' in a much better way. (CWC IV, 126).

Seminaries opened new vistas of learning for clerical candidates. The appreciation is found in the then Bishop's request to start similar seminaries at different places such as Vazhakulam (1866), Elthuruth (1868), Pulinkunnu (1972), but later merged into the seminary at

Mannanam. According to Kachappilly (1994), when priests were sent for ministry to different places in 1856, Chavara the first Prior General of the congregation had reminded that transformed attitude of people and their integral formation must be the most valuable and visible fruit of the congregation. In short, the foundation of the seminary was another visible sign of St. Chavara's vision of higher education and formation the priests and thus for the uplift of the church and the society in and through them. St. Chavara himself prepared retreats through reading, reflection and in consultation with his Divine Master. Well-trained priests were sent to different places for teaching Bible lessons and preaching retreats. That's why Marangatt (2004) confidently said that St. Chavara, the 'blessed' man who utilized the two most effective means of communication in the Indian Church of his time: the pulpit and the press.

### **Printing Press- The Best Means to Transfer Knowledge**

A printing press was again a sign of actualization of the twin ideals of St. Chavara: that is of education as well as the spiritual revival of people and church at large. Knowing the power of books on human life from his personal experience and from his scholarly spiritual Masters, St. Chavara founded a printing press in 1846 (Mundadan, 2008), as the best means to transfer knowledge, Christian doctrines and values to people. He knew the importance of the press in the process of socialization of people. The skilfulness, untiring attitude and hard labour St. Chavara put in the realization of the printing press is highly praiseworthy and different writers used the sublime adjectives to describe it. According to them, the establishment of a press at Mannanam is the most far-reaching, enduring, all-embracing, illuminating, edifying, and even sanctifying field of activity (Chackalackal, 2013). The herculean task of making the press a reality bears witness to his zeal and enthusiasm, and prophetic vision, in disseminating knowledge far and wide. A smith's skill, an agent's deal, and above all the kind Divine Providence—all played their part along with St. Chavara's unquenchable spirit and farsightedness to realize his dream of setting up a press in 1846 at Mannanam, in the name of St. Joseph.

### **St. Chavara- A Creative Writer**

The creative and innovative vision of St. Chavara urged him to acquire knowledge in different languages, culture, literary styles, spiritual doctrines, and history. And they found expression through his

writings. A man of wisdom he found time to produce different literary contributions which attract people, create interest, and transfer values and spirituality. St. Chavara's writings are expressions of his love for knowledge and his earnest desire and diligent attempts to disseminate it to his fellow beings. The use of Malayalam, the elegance of writing with stories, poems, events, anecdotes etc. increase the interest of readers and make them more inspiring and appealing. It is an amazing fact that amidst his hectic administrative and pastoral programmes he managed to find time to write. His writings contain variety, poetic flavour, mystical depths and apostolic urgency (Mundadan, 2008). They are rich mines of information and spiritual wealth which are as valid as in those times, even today (Chackalackal, 2013). Educational institutions, print media and publications were powerful instruments for social mobility; they augmented general education status of people and strengthened community progress in all respects with more lucrative job opportunities, power and status (Kuriedathu, 2013).

### **Sanskrit school – A New Endeavour**

The fourth step in educational contribution is the establishment of a Sanskrit school at Mannanam in 1846. It is the first visible form of educational institution initiated by Catholics of Kerala. He had the idea of education for all irrespective of caste, creed and gender (Mathukkutty, 2002). He made the rich and the poor to sit on the same bench in the school. He appointed Varriyer a high caste as a teacher to teach the higher caste and the lower caste children. In order to encourage poor children, he gave special care and assistance by means of books, dress and mid-day meal. Thus he stimulated the people of his era through his shared vision, intellectual thoughts and well-planned programmes. He kindled the lamp of education and put it on the stand to enjoy the luminosity even by the downtrodden.

When inequalities stemming from caste differences were the order of the day, a Sanskrit school was the only solution for breaking the barriers of the caste system. The reasons to start a Sanskrit school might be twofold: first, Sanskrit was considered to be the language par excellence since it was the Vedic language; and the second probable reason was the prohibition from the Catholic Latin Bishops to study English as they frightened that learning English would turn the people to Protestantism (Valerian 1938; Mundadan 2008).

## **Circular to Establish Schools – An Adventure**

When St. Chavara was the Vicar General of the Syrian-Catholics, in 1864 a circular got issued asking each parish to build schools attached to them. This circular remains as a milestone in the annals of history of education of the Church in the land of Kerala. The starting of the first school at Mannanam and the later order that came from St. Chavara in 1864 to start schools adjacent to every Church was prophetic and it laid the foundation of an unlimited social transformation in the society in Kerala (Kaniamparampil, 2004). With regard to the circular, an entry is seen in the Chronicles of Monastery at Mannanam, which says they had received a decree of the archbishop, which demanded that a school should be established adjacent to every parish. It warned that those who neglected to comply with this order would incur censure (CWC I, 1990; Valerian 1938; Mundadan, 2008). History proves the circular has produced high impetus in the field of education through the past one hundred and fifty years. A record from Shankaramenon (1901) is worth noting in this regard, The Christians, who form one-fourth of the state are better off in education than the members of other communities. As a school is attached to every church, the children of this community get better opportunities to attend school.

When there were no records of Catholic schools until 1865, according to Travancore Almanac (1908), the number of schools was raised to 778 for Syrian Catholics and, 369 for Latin Catholics (1147 schools for Catholics together) within almost 43 years from 1865 to 1908, while Protestants had 779 schools almost by 90 years of educational efforts in Kerala (Tharakan, 1984). This record proves that the “*Pallikoru Pallikoodam* circular” had influenced Syrian as well as Latin Catholics of Kerala. As a result, by 1908 the Catholics, particularly the Syrian Catholics, had the highest number of Christian schools in Travancore and Cochin. Syrian Catholic community quite quickly linked the gap that had existed in the field of education (Tharakan, 1997). Apart from the circular, the educational endeavours were boosted up also by liberal grant-in-aid of state government (1868-69) and vernacular school system. He admitted students of all sections of society, including Dalits. It paved the way for a social revolution when untouchability was at its summit. He emphasized that all children of God have an inalienable right to education. St. Chavara collected funds from parishes and important persons and brought a plot of wet paddy field nearby and ordered that the monastery must run it (Chackalackal,

2013; Mundadan, 2008). Understanding the needs of the people, St. Chavara began a mid-day meal system, as well as providing clothes and books, so that parents could send their wards without much tension in their poverty. Regarding this mid-a-meal system, Kerala historian Sreedharamenon writes with reference to the recommendation of Divan Sir C.P. Ayer to the king dated 26th November 1936, that St. Chavara was the inspiration for to start mid-day meal system in Kerala (Mollykutty, 2017).

### **Women Empowerment through Education**

The condition of women was not much different in Kerala as well as in different parts of India. Regarding the importance of women education, it is recorded in Kothari Commission report (1964- 66) that education of women is more relevant than that of men with regard to the wholesome development of human resources, the progress of family wellbeing and character formation of children. In short equal opportunity of education is to be provided to all students without any discrimination, aiming at the betterment of the society and they must be given freedom to pursue the course which is suitable and are interested in. With such prophetic strategy a century back St. Chavara initiated female education programmes and his attempts produced expected fruit.

St. Chavara's letter shows his dream of providing education for women through the efforts of female religious congregations. There were boarding schools attached to every convent. An excerpt from a letter of St. Chavara reads: "It is necessary that more monasteries and convents be opened in the south, that is, one monastery each to east and west of Mannanam and some convents with boarding houses. This will help very much to render necessary and useful spiritual ministry to the faithful of the two vicariates of Varapuzha and Kollam" (CWC IV/6/5).

In the chronicles of the first Convent at Koonammvu, give witness about the training and education of female students. Citing Nasrani Deepika Vol. 44/51 Valerian presents the words of appreciation recorded by a Jacobite scholar O. M. Cherian regarding the service of CMC sisters. According to him, the famous convent at Koonammavu which was founded by Chavara was spreading numerous blessings in the society. He added that not only the founding of the convent but every good work he had started trusting the Devine Providence were producing a

good result and they all turned to be the source development of Catholic Church (Valerian, 1938).

### **A Man Dreamed High**

Higher education in India was not very well organized during the 19th century. Though there were colleges in some of the cities in India, universities were established only in 1857. News of the establishment of the University of Madras made Saint Kuriakose aim high. Besides, the Church Missionary Society had already begun a college in Kottayam, the nearby city. Hence, he dreamed to establish a college at Mannanam (Plathottam, 1938) that would help the multifaceted growth of the Syriac Catholics. He began his efforts towards achieving this goal. Due to the sudden tide of events, it remained an unfulfilled dream for him and, for the Catholic Church in Kerala for nearly a half a century. A letter to the Prefect of *Propaganda Fide* by the assembly of Syriac clergy on October 5th, 1884, is noteworthy here. "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" (Paingott, 1996).

### **Dream Actualization through CMI Congregation**

Chavara dreamed of an integral education which blends secular sciences and spiritual sciences. The seminary started by him and the Edukkumdatu (boarding school attached to a convent) had the curriculum to blend secular and spiritual education. Its latest manifestation is found in Dharmaram Vidhya Kshetram and Christ University on the same campus. They are the extension and brain children of St. Chavara who did not want to separate secular education and sacred sciences. Now both the institutions are expanding far and wide in strength and courses of various disciplines imprinting their style of functioning and excellence.

In secular education as well as religious education and training CMI congregation and its contributions are highly appreciable in India as well as abroad. With regard to theological and philosophical education and formation, Dharmaram Vidhya Kshetram has demonstrated a glorious record for over half a century. Now, Dharmaram Vidhya Kshetram, the Pontifical Athenaeum of Philosophy, Theology, and Canon Law, imparts knowledge of sacred sciences to many-- seminarians, priests and religious. St. Chavara was the inspiration and motivation for his

successors to design such a multi-dimensional project (Chackalackal, 2013). The multi-linguistic, multicultural, and multi-ritual milieu of the place offers DVK abundant opportunities for development. It offers an integral formation to students through its life-oriented, situation-bound, community-committed, and culture-centered education and training. Students from different parts of India and abroad take benefit out of this institute and extend their service to the world at large. At present Dharmaram provides higher education to more than one thousand students with regard to philosophical and theological formation and research. Dharmaram has developed a unique style of education after the mind of St. Chavara the visionary architect by blending nature with nurture, the human with the divine, the secular with the religious.

### **Higher Education- CMI- CMC Contributions**

Following the educational vision of St. Chavara, many more educators of CMI and CMC congregation raised the educational contributions of the congregations to high status. Higher education centres, in general, adopt learner-centred pedagogical practices, innovative teaching techniques, transformational learning methodologies which enable the learner to reach higher levels of intelligent, emotional, spiritual and performance quotients. The research centred curriculum and research-based assessments for the adoption of new methodologies and techniques in education lead the teaching-learning process to greater heights. All CMI educational institutions aim at excellence both in academic and co-curricular fields. As an educational agency of the state with a specific apostolic dimension of the Catholic Church, our institutions try to uphold Catholic identity respecting the multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-linguistic community.

Now CMI congregation has 66 higher education institutions including one Deemed to be University which makes the presence and educational contributions of CMI make felt in a global scenario. They are very advanced with respect to the introduction of new and advanced disciplines, exchange programmes with advanced universities around the globe, progressive research methodologies, community services and internship programmes.

A special mention of CHRIST (Deemed to be University) which has completed 50 golden years of service to the education sector of India is relevant at this juncture. Apart from the higher education of students from 62 countries around the globe, it offers great service to the poor

and marginalised sections of the society through fee concession and scholarship programmes. In 2010-11 alone it had spent around six million rupees for the education of the students from the poorer sections of society (Chackalackal, 2013).

From the very beginning of its inception, CMC focused on the education of women and female children through boarding houses. According to the statistics of the golden jubilee year of CMC (1916), by 1913 CMC had established 13 schools. At present, CMC has 57 Higher Secondary schools, 114 High schools, 110 Upper Primary schools, and 106 Lower primary schools. CMC schools are often appreciated for peaceful and serene atmosphere, moral and spiritual orientation, systematic administration, good infrastructure, committed staff and excellent result. Having perceived the relevance of providing higher education to young women CMC took a major step in education by establishing St. Mary's college Thrissur (1946), the first women higher education institute of India. In the beginning, it was affiliated to Madras University, but in 1968 it got affiliated to Calicut University. Apart from St. Mary's CMC has three more colleges viz. Vimala College-Thrissur, Mercy College Palakkadu, and Carmel College - Mala. There are 5703 women are attaining higher education from these institutes. CMC is trying to reach higher education to more women in rural areas (3435) through eleven parallel colleges (CMC activity report, 2012).

### **Conclusion**

With respect to Catholic higher education centres, the mind of the church is revealed in a document from the Second Vatican Council. It reads:

... children and young people must be helped, with the aid of the latest advances in psychology and the arts and science of teaching, to develop harmoniously their physical, moral and intellectual endowments so that they may gradually acquire a mature sense of responsibility in striving endlessly to form their own lives properly and in pursuing true freedom as they surmount the vicissitudes of life with courage and constancy (Vatican Council II, Declaration on Christian Education, No. 1, 1987)

St. Chavara's mind is very much found reflected in Vatican documents and Church teachings on education such as that cited above. Classical definitions of education highlight the formation, and transformative impacts of education in personal and social dimension. Education

to all without any distinction was the mind of St. Chavara. Higher education expenses, market-driven policies, inadequate number of higher education institutions, difficulty to ensure character formation etc. remain as a challenge in the field of education in general and very particular in Catholic higher education today. Lack of social commitment and degradation in values are major issues which are to be looked at with great apprehension. Increasing self-centeredness, terrorism, corruption, bribery, a steep hike of divorce rates and suicides, sexual harassment, don't care attitudes, unhygienic garbage disposal, the rapid increase in alcoholism and its consequences, augmented crime tendencies, ethic-less money accumulations and transactions etc., increasing and tarnishing the face of our society. Education neither increases the social commitment nor refines the personality in many cases. So, prepare the students to withstand for values with non-compromising attitudes, to develop creative thinking which helps them to become knowledge producers, to inculcate an attitude of deep commitment for the society, to foster love for nature and a transformed zeal to protect the environment, to instil management techniques blended with life skills and soft skills, to enlighten them to blend commerce with ethics, to infuse moral and spiritual values etc. are the risky-challenges that the higher education institutions have to face today.

In these challenging situations CMI- CMC higher education institutes are invited to implement St. Chavara's vision extensively. Greater competence and commitment of faculty members, more professional development programmes and collaborative researches, increased rapport with students, personal counselling and constant mentoring, more scholarships to support financially weak students etc, will help us to actualize St. Chavara vision with greater precision. Achieving a "connected campus," where students and teachers from diverse backgrounds have real and positive social relationships with one another, would support the inclusive mission of our institutions.

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