

Relevance of Renewed Reformation in the society

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Abstract

The research deals with the socio cultural scenario and the need of renewed reformation in the society especially during the 19th century in the context of Kerala. This study looks into the customs and practices that prevailed in the society. This research tries to understand the contribution of St. Chavara- a great reformer- to the society. He is the pioneer of many initiatives in various fields such as education, print media, women empowerment, and charitable organizations. Through education and women empowerment St. Chavara tried to bring equality in the society. The researcher use Marxist theory to support this study especially to look upon the structure of the society. According to the Marxism, the state is fundamentally an instrument of class domination. In other words, the state is used by the bourgeoisie to exploit the common people and in that sense, it is machinery for exploitation. Caste system and inequality were also marks of Kerala society during the 19th century.

Key words: *society, caste system, untouchability, discrimination, women, reformation.*

Relevance of Renewed Reformation in the society

The social reformation in the Kerala society has a great history. This study looks at the social reformation happened in Kerala during the 19th century and the contribution of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara to the society. An understanding of the ground reality of Kerala in the 19th century is essential to know the significance of Kuriakose Elias Chavara's contributions to the Kerala society. The 19th and 20th centuries witnessed the emergence of a new social order in Kerala under the impact of the diverse social economic and cultural changes. Even towards the end of the 18th century, the traditional social structure had begun to show signs of tottering. Chavara lived at a time when our society was moving through a period of extreme depression and gloom. The social situations of Kerala during his life time were deplorable due to the existence of a caste- oriented and socially unequal society.

Before dealing with the various stages by which the new social order was ushered in, it is better to have a brief review of Kuriakose Elias Chavara (1805-1871), a renowned social reformer, a native from the land of Kerala in India. Chavara was born on 10 February 1805 in a remote village of Kuttanadu in the south part of Kerala. At the very young age, he realized his

mission and became a priest. He was a man with unique vision and mission that led him to pave a new way in the social transformation. He was very much affected by the inequality, caste system, ill-treatment of women and the low caste, untouchability, and denial of education to the marginalised. He considered the humanity as his own brethren and committed his life for the well-being of the society. He firmly believed in the right to maintain the dignity of each and every individual and the upholding of the same became the major priority of his services.

Caste system was so prevalent in such a way that upper cast enjoyed all the privileges and the lower cast was denied even the most elementary human rights. Government jobs and general education were denied to people of the lower castes. Within the frame work of cast, there were sub casts. They were not allowed even to walk along public roads. Untouchability and such evil customs were predominant and accepted practices in the society. The government itself set up norms and instructions to set a limit for the untouchables to walk along public paths and market (Menon, 1979). Caste system was a great evil in the society. The high class alone had the authority to interpret the law. The law spared high class from the death penalty. The lower the status of a person in the society greater the severity of the punishment meted out to him. The members of the lower cast were also called upon to make all kinds of iniquitous payment to the state if they wanted to live a fairly comfortable life. There were innumerable restrictions in the matter of dress, ornaments, mode of conveyance, use of domestic vessels, the manner of constructions of houses etc. Some of the lower classes considered untouchable by upper class (Menon, 1979). It is against this backdrop of unjust rules and discrimination that the heroic efforts of Chavara become important and relevant.

Chavara had a great vision that a woman can reform the family so that the society could be transformed. He worked hard for the emancipation of women. Women were undergoing all kinds of exploitation. Dalit women were not allowed to cover their breast, especially in front of higher caste people whom they compelled to call '*Thampuran*' (Lord). The dalits lived in the property of the landlords of higher castes and worked for them as bonded labourers. This was considered their obligation. They would be forced to work, but wages would not be paid. As they were forced to bow to their wishes of their masters, they had no self-respect. Even when abused and raped, their women folk could not raise their voice in protest. In this context, Chavara established women religious congregation and trained them in many ways. These religious have given proper formation to the women and girl children around. They were trained in stitching, craft works, and art. It helped them to do work and attain small income as their own.

The progress and development of a society largely depend on the status of its women. During those days women were subjected to inhuman treatment. They lived in captivity within the family – as daughter, wife, mother or even grandmother. Just as Virginia Woolf dreamt of 'a room of one's own' Chavara fulfilled his mission through the foundation of the congregation for women. He introduced vocational training for the weak and destitute women in the society. Schemes were developed for young girls to have an education (Paul 185). Chavara worked hard to raise the status of his fellow beings and provide them better chances to progress through innovative initiatives and opening opportunities for everyone to flourish and progress. He was always with the marginalised in the society. He insisted that just wages should be provided. The words and deeds of Chavara proclaim his great vision for the uplift of the people in the society. During Chavara's time, the dalits were compelled to work. They were not given just wages.

Father Chavara objected to this system. Chavara was very much compassionate towards the poor and marginalized people of the society. In the history of the life of the Church in Kerala, before the time of Chavara, there was no charitable institute as such, where the aged persons or orphans were cared for and protected.

From his life, influences, and literary works one can understand that the social change he wished to create was one that upheld human dignity that approved human worth and holds everyone with equal respect and deference. The education was the right of a small minority during those days. He sought to bring about the reformation by issuing a decree that schools which provide education to all regardless of caste or religion be established beside the Catholic parishes. Thus he laid the foundation for a civil society (Radhakrishnan, 42). He initiated free education by establishing Sanskrit school at Mannanam in 1846. This school was the cradle of equality and human dignity.

Considering the social situation of the nineteenth century, St. Chavara took commendable steps to raise the living standards of women, dalits and the downtrodden by educating them and thus enabling them to rise above the clasps of discrimination. Even when the public schools had admitted only upper caste children, Chavara established a school for all, invited all students and accepted them under one roof. St. Chavara expanded his educational activities as per the need of the students, and requirement of the society. He not only started schools, but his human concern urged him to think of necessities for its sustenance and regular attendance of students, and his out of box thinking forced him to look for financial resources for the school. St. Chavara purchased a plot of paddy field with the help of people of good will, to meet the expenses of the school, and ordered one of the monasteries to run it (Mollykutty 281).

All children irrespective of caste and creed learned not only the lessons of Sanskrit and other subjects but also the lessons for life. He passed through all villages and made the people aware of education and inspired them to join the school. He had initiated midday meal for the financially backward children. He met the financial needs of students with the help of people of good will. Chavara could eliminate caste discrimination through the establishment of schools. Today Kerala is holding a high literacy rate and people are enjoying the equal social status and the fruits of development.

A crowd does not constitute a society because its members having nothing in common. It becomes one only when its members share the same values, aims, and strategies. Members of Kerala's cast-ravaged society of the time were in conflict with one another. It was schools that gave Kerala society common targets to aim. In other words, it was schools that transformed Kerala in civil society. Chavara said: "just as without eye one cannot see the material things in the world, so also without knowledge it will be impossible for us to see and understand the reality of the world and the eternity of God. As those who have no eye are called blind, so as to those who have no learning are to be called intellectually blind" (Radhakrishnan 42).

Chavara was a person who had a special eye upon the poor and the needy. In Kerala there were no charitable institutions initiated by the Church before his time. He was the one established the first charitable institute at Kainakary where the aged persons or orphans were cared for and protected. "This was an institution to give refuge to the sick and destitute who had no one to look after them, and to prepare the dying to face a happy death. This was being run by the members of

a lay charitable organisation “Confraternity of St. Joseph for happy death”. This was the beginning of the organised humanitarian work of the Kerala Church” (Scaria and Binoy 198).

Another important agent of social transformation is the emergence of print media. Chavara began a great revolution through print media. He ushered into this field through the establishment of a printing press in the year 1846 at Mannanam. Paper and ink shaped a unique cultural sensibility in Kerala. He had a vision that print media can unlock the door of literacy. According to him, knowledge was light and ignorance was blindness or darkness. He dreamt of a society carrying the lamp of knowledge and human values. He understood that printing good books and reaching it even to the least of the society will help to form a value oriented society. He assured himself that knowledge will banish all kinds of inequalities and evils in the society. It opened up a new circle of discourse through printed books, popular literature, and newspapers. Kerala was just entering a culture of technology.

Printing technology was monopolised by Europeans in those days. There were mainly three presses during these days. 1) CMS press at Kottayam started by European evangelist Benjamin Bailey, 2) Mission Press at Thalasserry by Herman Gundert and Government Press at Trivandrum. European technology was highly expensive. Printing in mother tongue was a mirage. In this situation, Chavara took the initiative to establish a printing press for vernacular printing. He went to government press at Trivandrum and engraved a model of the machine. Based on the model a carpenter carved out a wooden printing machine. Later on, various moulds were formed for printing. Chavara spent long days and nights struggling to develop a Kerala model in printing. The shift from manuscript to print brought a revolution in communication in Kerala (Rajasekharan 58-75).

St. Chavara was a literary reformer too. He was equipped with knowledge and shared it with the people through his literary works. He printed many books that helped the people to broaden the horizon of their knowledge. He translated books from other languages into Malayalam. The oldest existing Malayalam daily, ‘Nasrani Deepika’ published at Mannanam press in 1887. He contributed a lot to the Malayalam literature through his various literary works. Among them, *Anasthasya’s Martyrdom* is the first minor epic (khandakavyam) in Malayalam literature. Chavara has foreseen that spiritual, intellectual, social advantages through the printing technology. Kerala society also experienced a cultural reformation too. He had a great dream of a sublime society upholding all human values and enjoying equal freedom without any kind of separation or discrimination. He found many means to reach out this vision. He was a spiritual leader who tried to uplift the society and form a new culture that upholds the value of equality and justice.

Chavara’s vision about a reformed society helped him to make aware the people the importance of being educated, the need for helping the poor and old age people and orphans, giving justice to every individual and doing charitable acts to the needy. He was a strong supporter of justice. He was ready to help everybody belong to any communities without any kind of segregation based on caste, class, religion, intellect, colour and sex. Chavara advocated equal human dignity throughout his life by initiating a number of activities that were unknown to Kerala society till then. He was the pioneer of establishing an inclusive educational institution, print media, literary revolution, old age home, midday meal and many spiritual reformations though he was ignored by the society for a long time. It is the right time and a great obligation to

give him proper tribute as we are privileged to be enriched by his visionary innovations. Analysing all contributions done by Chavara it is very clear that St. Chavara was a harbinger of human dignity who gave significant contributions to awaken the social cognizance of Kerala.

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