

# St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara: A Unique and Vibrant Educational Visionary of Kerala

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**Abstract:** St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara was born in Kerala, India on 10<sup>th</sup> February, 1805. He led an extra ordinary life of holiness and committed action for the transformation of the society. He died on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1871 and was canonised by his Holiness Pope Francis on 23<sup>rd</sup> November, 2014. The Kerala society at the time of St. Chavara was very much backward in social, cultural and educational levels. St. Chavara was a visionary leader of the time who envisaged many plans for the spiritual and social progress of the Church and society. His educational contributions laid a strong foundation for a just society in which all human beings were worthy of erudition, justice, respect and dignity. He is credited with foundations of two congregations, indigenous printing press and publications, a Sanskrit School, schools adjoined to every parish church, boarding school attached to convents and initiation of women empowerment programmes. His educational reforms brought a new dawn in the educational history of the state of Kerala. St. Chavara's education vision includes inclusion, expansion and equity, excellence, and a comprehensive outlook. This study is to identify his major contributions in the field of education which resulted in the fast development of Kerala.

**Keywords:** Visionary educator, inclusion, expansion, excellence, women emancipation, dissemination of knowledge, comprehensive development.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Education and development are two complementary realities with regard to individuals as well as nations; and one without the other becomes stifled. Education is further considered critical with regard to empowerment, equity and social justice with regard to people of all times. A quick glance into the history of Kerala, manifests a retarded society in the absence of true education in the nineteenth century, and a highly developed state among all Indian states as a fruit of empowerment through education. According to a working paper of United Nations (June, 2013), Kerala is presented as an empirical example which shows that it is possible to attain growth and improved income distribution through human development; and it continues that Kerala is the only state in whole of India with very high Human Development Index (0.79) and highest Education Index (0.915).[1] The following table vivifies the fact clearly.

STATES	Literacy rate Source: <a href="http://populationcommission.nic.in">http://populationcommission.nic.in</a>	EDUCATION INDEX- Source: UN Report, June 2013	Human Development Index- Source : EconomicSurvey2011-12
Kerala	93.91	0.915	0.790
Him. Pradesh	83.78	0.790	0.652
M. Pradesh	70.63	0.337	0.375
Odisha	73.5	0.281	0.362

As per historians, ancient Kerala had a glorious history with regard to education and social equity. According to the view of Elamkulam Kunjanpillai education was universal in Kerala during the *Sangam*[2] period and there was a high level of literacy at that time. He further states that women were educated like men and were free.[3] But the ideology of common

education was waned with the beginning of the Aryan system of Chaturvarnya. Education became the autocratic privilege of the higher classes in the society and, women and the low castes lost their right to erudition. Though caste system existed in all states of India, in Kerala it was in the most accentuated form with respect to two realities: viz. dehumanization of women and segregating people by castes, “Kerala was a worse sinner than the rest of India.”[4] Women were not only considered inferior to men but treated simply as instruments for the happiness of men.[5] The parity of women also varied in accordance with the caste they belonged to viz. Brahmins, Nairs, *Ezhavas* and slave castes, and all were ill-treated with gradation. The social system in Kerala became so unjust, and inhuman practices were awfully prevalent to be referred to as a ‘lunatic asylum’.[6] This is the historic time St. Chavara[7] was born (1805-1871). He obtained basic tutelage from then prevalent traditional educational institution,[8] and became a Catholic priest in 1829.

In Kerala, the educational revolution began with the arrival of foreign missionaries viz: London Mission Service (LMS) and Church Mission Society (CMS), in early nineteenth century. They initiated their educational endeavours from 1806 and 1816 respectively. But its fruits were acquired chiefly by some sections of non-Catholic Christians as and people belong to lower sections of the society. Following their example, government began some initiatives in education supported by British resident colonel Munro, and thus modern education system came into existence in the state since 1817. Though these enterprises brought some changes in the educational domain of Kerala, learning remain alienated for most of the lower castes as well as women in general and Catholics in particular[9]. Chavara a man of unique vision realised education as the best means of human uplift and social mobility. His contributions laid a strong foundation for the educational, social and financial development of Kerala. This is an attempt to look into the educational contributions of Chavara in detail.

#### ***Objectives of the Study:***

To discover the unique contributions of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara for the education reformation of Kerala in the nineteenth century and to identify his unique vision which inspires the educationists of then and now.

#### ***Methodology:***

It is a descriptive study based on the primary and secondary sources by and on St. Chavara. It has made use of the primary sources such as writings by Chavara. There are four volumes in the *Complete Works of Chavara (CWC)*, each of them with separate subtitles: Volume one, *Chronicles* (Vol.I, 1831-1855, Vol. II, 1855-1870); Volume two, *Literary Works*, which includes “Compunction of the Soul” (1869-70), Volume three, *Spiritual Works*, which includes “Colloquies with the Heavenly Father” (1868); Volume Four, *Letters*. And relevant secondary sources that are related to the theme of the study are also used.

The following sections deal with the important points of educational vision of St. Chavara which was taken shape at the socio-economic and educational background of Kerala in nineteenth century. Educational vision of Chavara is being analysed using his writings, and by his contributions for the cause of education of all, women empowerment programmes, attempts to disseminate knowledge through print media and literary contributions.

## **II. EDUCATION VISION OF ST. CHAVARA**

St. Chavara was a visionary, an innovative front-runner and enthusiastic educationist with prompt initiatives and strategies. His vision of human beings and society are originated from a divine vision. The one who sees God in oneself recognises the same God in others too. Such was the experience of St. Chavara. In his poetical writing *Atmanutapam* he expresses his deep desire to see God[10] 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. The life of Chavara testifies that the divine vision he obtained in contemplation got transformed into a human vision; and the one complemented the other. So every ‘other individual’ was important for him. In a society of discrimination, in which people looked the each other with contempt, as members of a particular castes: *Avarnas/Savarnas*, to St. Chavara, all were reflections of God Himself. So he undoubtedly wrote serving suffering human beings is the most meritorious service before God.[11] This God realization energised him to be ‘an engine of activity’[12] with the heart and hands of a *Karmayogi*[13]. So for people who had been denied education, he turned to be an educator; for all who were deprived of books, he became an apostle of printing technology and an author

by himself, and to who were denied knowledge, he became disseminator of knowledge; to those were caught in the grip of old traditions, he became a herald of social transformation.

### ***Inclusion:***

True education is an all-inclusive in essence; it acknowledges and respects differences of age, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, HIV status etc. The education structure and methodologies must respond to multi segment learners with varied approach. Such education will promote inclusive society with equity and dignity[14] The “inclusion and equity” are major concerns of all educational reforms in India.

As seen early, St. Chavara was born and brought up in Kerala at the beginning of nineteenth century which was rigid and stagnant. Chavara a man of unique vision and personal charisma[15] could identify the abnormalities existed in the society and the power of education for establishing equity and justice in the society. A clear and specific vision and attitude to the society, creative plan of action to raise human dignity, and constant and practical efforts to illumine human minds are seen in his life and activities. So he wrote in one of his letters that ignorance is blindness and knowledge is light.[16] All discriminations in the name of caste, gender, religion, or financial status was originated from ignorance, he understood and hence he used education as the most powerful weapon, to fight against evils existed in the society. The first step of Chavara in the field of education is the establishment of a ‘Sanskrit school’ in 1846 at Mannanam[17]. As English education of foreign missionaries and common schooling of government were denied to Catholics by the foreign Church authorities, Chavara’s creative mind found Sanskrit the most ancient languages of the world rich with literature, as the best substitute. Sanskrit was considered as a divine language and was used to write many scriptural books. It is recorded that the Sanskrit school was open for all people irrespective of caste, gender or religion.[18] About the Sanskrit school at Mannanam, we get historical notes from Fr. Varkey Parappuram, Fr. Valerian Plathottam and Fr. Mathias Mundadan:

At the same time ... a Sanskrit school was established at Mannanam attached to monastery. In it the priests and others in the monastery, as also students from neighboring places were studying. For the proper running of the school they had brought from Thrissur a teacher ... Because of his expertise in Sanskrit, Prior Chavara also started to learn Sanskrit from him.[19]

So, it can be rightly said that the most challenging and most revolutionary step Chavara had ever taken in the field of education, is the establishment of the Sanskrit school, which is the best expression of his human concern, and inclusiveness.

The concept of universal education of St. Chavara opened a new path; it was an invitation for marginalised to rise to main stream of the society. Chackalackal writes: “As the children from the socially and culturally marginalized were offered a chance to be educated, Chavara facilitated not only their socio-cultural and financial betterment but also their re-integration into the mainstream of society.”[20] It inspired the social reformers of Kerala who came to scene later period of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Almost 46 and 50 years later Travancore and Kochi followed St. Chavara’s concept of widespread schooling.[21] It is well specified in the statement of Kerala Chief Minister Oommen Chandy, “The upliftment of Dalits had been a Major objective of Chavara Kuriakose Elias. The social reform initiated by Fr. Elias had no parallel in the history of Kerala.”[22]

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 school for all, invited all students and accepted them under one roof.

### ***Expansion:***

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.[23] Owing to his far-sightedness, prudence, wisdom and social relationship, he had also initiated a midday meal scheme for poor school children. In the background of economic backwardness of most of the people in the

nineteenth century Kerala, this was a new and right initiative. And thus he prepared children from the nearby villages to regularly attend the schools.[24] About which P. Lalmohan mentions that through this noon-day-meal scheme, he achieved remarkable reformation in the field of education. According to him St. Chavara was concerned about the practicability of the scheme and was not discouraged by reflections of the past in the rear view mirror.[25] It paved way for the government to implement the scheme to a higher bandwidth a half century later.

Later, more schools were started; and in 1864 through an official declaration to start schools attached to every parish, a new road is opened in the educationally and culturally barren land of Kerala for the fast expansion of Education. Kaniampampam notes, "The starting of the first school at Mannanam and the later order that came from Blessed Chavara in 1864 to start schools adjacent to every Church was prophetic and it triggered a great social change in the society in Kerala." [26] The way paved by Chavara was immediately trodden by the congregations founded by him and the whole Catholic Church with enthusiasm. When there were no record of schools for Catholics till 1865, the number became very high by 1887. According to Travancore Almanac as cited in Tharakan, the number of Catholic schools became 1147 in 1908 [27] It is from the very beginning, catholic schools were opened for common people without any distinction.

### *Excellence:*

St. Chavara was a self-made scholar contrary to the common practice of the time. He not only equipped himself with higher learning, but enriched a group as well as society in turn from his knowledge and experience. In a word it can be rightly summarised that he was an excellent educator who aspired and worked for excellence. He was 'the education guru' and trend setter of the time. The effective attempts for excellence can be analysed from the life and undertakings of St. Chavara in a present educational perspective. Quality and excellence are major concerns in education today. They are not activities, but are products of environment which has to be built bit by bit at all levels, that hinges on (a) physical infrastructure, (b) adequate quality teachers, (c) effectiveness of teaching-learning process, (d) sustained efforts for promoting research, and (e) effective academic governance. [28] The learner-centred and process-oriented education, competency, environmental-concern, appropriate teaching-learning strategies, creation of motivation, practice based value education, skill development and social commitment are also included in measures of quality and excellence.

Effective academic governance is one of the important elements of excellent and quality education. If education is an enhancing the process, the educators are to be considered the 'hub' of the educational process [29]. St. Chavara had turned to be such an effective hub of ecclesial and social activities for more than 30 years in the land of Kerala. He was a community leader with nobility, sanctity, innovative planning, reasonable initiatives, and excellent organization capacity. He was a vigilant, prudent but inspiring front-runner of the time. For him all the three components of excellence - methods, process and product were important. He succeeded in creating knowledge, retaining knowledge and transferring knowledge and thus multiplied the effectiveness of educational system. As far as knowledge is retained without transferring, knowledge does not multiply, but become stagnant. In the case of St. Chavara, individual learning led to self-progress as well as community progress.

As seen early, for Chavara education was essential for the integral development of an individual and all round growth of the society. His activities were directed on the promotion of intellectual, corporal, social, moral and spiritual values. The motive force behind all these activities was the transformation of the society. He had given special emphasis on teaching and training of values which is manifested in the code of conduct of families, written in 1868 [30] It emphasises role of parents and family members regarding the training of their children in religious, moral and social values. Like an experienced psychologist he wrote down the importance of early training of children. And he instructed the sisters of the first convent to teach the boarders different languages, lessons to grow in spiritual life and also Christian virtues. [31]

Training in values is of prime importance in the present scenario which is marked by technological development. It has brought about easy access to knowledge, faster development of society, quality of personal life, and better global relationships. On the other hand, it has also resulted in the increase of destructive applications of science and technology, environmental degradation, unethical money accumulation and transaction, and deterioration of human values. The issue today is not the lack of knowledge; it is wisdom that is in crisis: wisdom as the feeling of right and wrong, as the Chinese thinker Mencius defined. [32] So the present situation necessitates a new search for integration, as one period of human civilization draws to a close. Therefore the education provide today must be deep rooted with strong fundamentals of moral and spiritual training along with intellectual formation, psychological maturity and skill development. Such a

comprehensive education was initiated by St. Chavara; and he inspired his successors to continue this broad vision of inclusive, integral and quality education with timely expansion and renewal.

### ***Women Emancipation:***

Women empowerment programmes are a common phenomenon of the modern society. According to APJ Abdul Kalam as cited in Satrusallya, “Empowering women is a pre-requisite for creating a good nation. When women are empowered, society with stability is assured. Empowerment of women is essential as their thoughts and their value systems lead to the development of a good family, good society and ultimately a good nation.”[33] The present generation is aware that without education of women sustainable growth of the society is impossible. So government of India as well as state governments take some admirable steps to ensure education of women. Even now in this women empowerment era, many interior villages of different Indian states find educating female children is meaningless. The gap in male and female literacy rate are higher in some of the states of India; the table establishes the fact.[34]

state	Male-Female Literacy gap	state	Male-Female Literacy gap
Kerala	4%	Rajasthan	27.8%
Mizoram	4.3%	Jharkhand	22.3%
Nagaland	6.6%	Chhattisgarh	20.9%
Him. Pradesh	14.2%	M. Pradesh	20.5%

Though St. Chavara lived much before the modern women’s empowerment programs, he was well aware that the stability and sanctity of families depended mostly on well-groomed women in society. Through his personal experience in his family, St.Chavara had realized that investment in women’s education would produce better fruits in the life of the individual, family and society at large. This realization enabled his creative mind to formulate women empowerment ideas. He was also conscious of the social taboos which had tied up the eighteenth and nineteenth century women. He wanted to raise their dignity and to make them self-reliant. He knew that ‘only empowered women could work creatively and dynamically for emancipation of women’. So once again this visionary created a way by himself to be tread; he commenced the first women’s empowerment programs in the Catholic Church in 1866 by founding a religious Congregation for women (Women TOCD[35]) with the help and co-operation of Fr. Leopold Becarro.[36] He founded the congregation for women when education was inaccessible for women of Kerala. By founding this congregation he thought of equipping ladies in basic education, handicrafts, value based life etc. With this purpose a boarding school for girls was attached to the convent in 1868.[37] Apart from the spiritual and intellectual development they must earn for their financial progress, was his dream. “It was the first step towards self-realization of women in Kerala. He is best remembered for uplifting women and the suppressed and oppressed in the society.”[38] Thus St. Chavara walked ahead of others of his times. His contributions resulted in unimaginable social changes for which the society witness even today. His unique contributions opened a new era of educational revolution for women which increased their resourcefulness, confidence and dignity. At present the female literacy rate in Kerala is increased to 92% where as in India 65.46% in 2014.[39] The unique contributions of the church and religious congregations founded by St. Chavara and the women congregations came thereafter need special praise in this regard.

### ***Indigenous Printing Technology:***

Howard Rheingold reveals the mystery of a printing press as cited in Rajasekharan, in the following words: “You can’t have an industrial revolution, you can’t have democracies, and you can’t have populations who can govern themselves until you have literacy.”[40] The printing press simply unlocked literacy. The uncountable benefits of a printing press was though totally not known to St. Chavara in 1840s, he knew the power of books on human life from his personal experience, and also from his scholarly Malpans (Palackal and Porukkara). So the hold of printing technology and its use to hand over knowledge to generations became a passionate dream of St. Chavara. Printing machines and associated equipments were not manufactured in India at his time. The indigenisation of technology, revamping available technology

to suit Malayalam language etc. we're staggering task of the time.[41]The excellence that St. Chavara achieved in learning, became a source of self-inspiration for him to raise the humanity around him also to a higher level of learning. His charisma from within, so to say, motivated him to see that the people are better educated.[42] So he dreamed beyond the time and undertook this herculean challenge. K. C. Chacko the biographer of Chavara writes that the most far reaching, enduring, all-embracing, illuminating, edifying, and even sanctifying field of activity, initiated by Chavara was that of printing.[43] He found a printing press as best means to transfer knowledge, Christian doctrines and values, and above all to prepare a group of socially awakened people to guide the generations to come.

He commenced his endeavours for a printing press from 1843, though actualized in 1846.[44] A smith's skill, an agent's deal, and above all the kind Divine Providence –all played their part along with Chavara's unquenchable spirit and farsightedness to actualize his dream of setting up a press in 1846 at Mannanam, in the name of St. Joseph. At that time Kerala had only two printing presses: one at Trivandrum (government press) and a CMS press at Kottayam. Both were with a western touch and used for limited purposes, viz: administrative and missionary activities respectively. According to P. K. Rajasekharan, "His (Chavara's) mission had a blend of spirituality and modernity. By bringing about the progress of the church to parish schools and to printing house and literature, he became one of the catalysts of social reformation of Kerala in nineteenth century." [45] J. Marangatt's observation, regarding the service through the printing press and publication, is worth mentioning at this context:

Foreseeing the spiritual, intellectual, and cultural advantages and the progress which the press and publication would bring to the community, Chavara established a printing press at Mannanam, the first printing press of the Catholic Church in Kerala. We can confidently say that Chavara is a 'blessed' man who was behind the two most effective means of communication in the Indian Church of his time: the pulpit and the press.[46]

Educational institutions and, print media & 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.

#### ***Literary Contributions:***

St. Chavara possessed erudition, practical wisdom and the effective communication skills than his contemporaries. So he created knowledge and shared it through his own writings so that the society might develop and acquire better value system. The writings of St. Chavara well depict his philosophy of life. One's human perception and philosophical insights are interdependent; so also Chavara's. Though religious thoughts dominates in his views, relationship with other people and society, are central to his philosophical thoughts.[47]Freedom of expression and clarity of ideas are special features of Chavara's writings. Poetical works, reflective and meditative records, historical documents, dramatic verses, testaments, letters, administrative guidelines, futuristic perspectives etc. are found in his writings. Mundadan, M. writes about St. Chavara in the following words:

Almost all persons who knew Blessed Chavara gave unstinted tribute to his intellectual acumen and continuous pursuit of knowledge. In all his writings and correspondence as in many of his other endeavors, we can easily discern a person of keen intelligence thirsting for acquiring and spreading knowledge. His sense of right discernment and correct judgment flowed from his intellectual acumen and wide knowledge of various aspects of life.[48]

It is estimated that there are more than a hundred writings of St. Chavara in several categories that have come down to the present generation. His writings contain variety, poetic flavour, mystical depth, and apostolic urgency[49] As Sukumar Azhikode notes, St. Chavara has enriched Malayalam language by his literary contributions both in poem and prose.[50]As per the *Positio*, all these writings have been scientifically researched into, and their authenticity have been established by the historical commission for the cause of St. Chavara's canonization.[51] His 'Eclogues (*Idaya Natakangal*) is considered the first Malayalam Drama. As per previous concepts the first Malayalam play was *Abhinjna Shakuntalam* translated by Kerala Verma Valiakovil Thampuram. But it was written in 1882, while the *Idaya Natakangal* was written and staged in seminaries by students of Chavara decades back. So Chavara can be considered as father of Malayalam Drama. So also the credit of the first narrative poem (*Khanda kavyam*) is now attributed to Chavara; because he wrote the *Khanada kavyam*- Anasthasya's Martydom in 1862, while the declared *khandakavyam*- *Malayavilasm* by AR Rajaraja Varma was written in 1895. His literary contributions are well acknowledged in the religious as well as social and cultural zones. They communicate supreme values of life. The revitalization of these values in the minds of people is

far more relevant than its status in literary history. In short all the works of St. Chavara represent the revival of three-pronged method of meditation viz: thought, word and deed[52].

### III. CONCLUSION

This study reveals the following facts regarding factual educational contributions of St. Chavara.

1. As a visionary leader he initiated educational reformation from 1846 and continued till the end of his life, so as to create a society of freedom and mobility. He worked for the education of the marginalized and women and began women empowerment programmes which are continued till the date by the members of the congregations he founded. Aiming at educational and cultural growth of the society he started schools, printing press, produced many literary contributions, and given guide lines to the families as well as to the congregations of CMI and CMC which are founded by St. Chavara.
2. His personal life inspires the educators and students of all times to imbibe an indomitable spirit and work towards acquiring and imparting knowledge to better the society. His letters throw light on family's responsibilities for the education and formation of children, parent-teacher participation and educational leadership of priests and sisters.

From these findings it can rightly concluded that St. Chavara was a visionary educationist who contributed greatly for the creation of a literate Kerala. From St. Chavara's life, contributions, and writings one can surmise that the education he wished to impart was an education that upheld human dignity that empowered women and the marginalised, that imparted values of life, that led to a deeper relation to God and the society, that enriched the society with good deeds and that made the world a better place to live in.

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