

# EDUCATION AS A MISSION THAT IS INCLUSIVE

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## Abstract

Christianity as a religion focussed mainly on the spiritual transformation of human beings in the first millennium. In the second millennium, it realized the unique role of reason in the emancipation of individuals. Hence, it augmented the establishment of institutions that catered to the sharpening of reason. In every part of the world, direct or indirect influence of the Church is seen in the spread of education. India is not an exception. Christianity in India was bit hesitant to open up educational ventures until 19<sup>th</sup> century. Openness to the world outside the walls of the Church in India was beyond one's reason especially in the Catholic Circles of India. There came a prophet of change in the person of Saint Kuriakose Elias who opened the first school India in 1846 for people of all walks of life with a mission of social inclusion. Later, he was instrumental in commanding all the Churches under his jurisdiction under the threat of closure, to open schools attached to them. These two pioneering and daring steps taken by him could be considered as the most crucial steps that later helped Keralam, a state in the southern-most tip of India, to be on par with developed nations of the world in many human development indices including literacy.

## Introduction

India is a large mosaic of cultures. Every culture in India is highly influenced and shaped by many regional, religious and rational elements. Politically, India is a union of three dozens of states and territories. Among the states of India, there is a unique one that is located between the Arabian Sea and mountain ranges on its west and east respectively. Among the many unique features of this small state, Keralam, with a population of 33 million, is its high literacy rate 94% against the national literacy rate of 74%. (Anon., 2011) Vice President of India, Hamid Ansari on January 13, 2016 declared Keralam as the first Indian state to have achieved total primary education. (Anon., 2016)

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Literacy is not an overnight achievement. There are many factors that lead to the high literacy rate of Keralam. Some attribute it to the effective measures taken from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the rulers of the princely states that formed Keralam. Some others attribute it to the pivotal social movements of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There are some others who attribute it to the policies and implementations of the political leaders of Keralam after its formation since 1 November 1956. This article is a humble attempt to narrate the attempts of Kuriakose Elias, a Catholic saint who lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century whose initiatives have strong impact in the later centuries. His vision and mission is a remarkable example of the Christian influence in transforming a society through the magic wand called “Education.” He is one of the first Indian Christian leaders who was bold enough to effectively use education as a tool of social inclusion.

### **Keralam in the 19<sup>th</sup> century**

Kuriakose Elias hailed from a remote waterlogged village of Keralam, called Kainakari. It is interesting to note that even as of December 2015, one cannot reach his place of birth by road. He was born on February 8, 1805 to a social situation where only boys of upper caste of Hinduism were given formal education that too through the local school known as *Ezhuthu Kalari* (Writing School). (Onakkoor, 1987) They were mostly single tutor owned family owned schools. A predominantly agrarian society, known in the West as Pepper Kingdom, Keralites never could have felt the need of formal education until 19<sup>th</sup> century. Business could effectively be handled through arm and fist topped up by practical wisdom rather than academic intelligence. This was one of the reasons why the Europeans could take control of all the business within a short span of time after their arrival in India. Though, Mathematics (Joseph, 2009) and Health Science (World Health Organization, 2010) (*Ayurveda*) (Wujastyk, 2003) have flourished in Keralam during the middle of the second millennium, the access was limited to a nearly negligible minority of the population.

Though Malayalam was the medium for communication, most of the literature was in Sanskrit. As a classical language, Sanskrit kept its elitism and hence was away from the reach of common man. One of the most powerful princely states which is part of the present Keralam was Travancore. In the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century Travancore yielded to the patronage of the English East India Company.

Queen Gowri Parvathy Bhai of Travancore, with the help of the British Colonel Munro, established vernacular schools in 1819. (Onakkoor, 1992) This was a remarkable decision in the history of Keralam. Though the implementation was very slow it brought radical changes in every aspect of the social life of Keralites. During this period, Church Missionary Society and London Missionary society founded several faith schools in various parts of Travancore. Swathi Thriunal Maharaja who ruled Travancore from 1829 to 1846 brought English education in Travancore. (Onakkoor, 1992)

### **Catholic Church in Keralam in the 19<sup>th</sup> century**

Christianity the third largest religion and is close to a fifth of the population of Keralam. There was only a single Christian Community in India until the 15<sup>th</sup> century. However, after the arrival of the European missionaries and merchants and by the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, divisions in the Christianity were not unusual. One of the largest sections of the Christians was the section that was ruled by the missionaries sent by the Pope and the Portugal ruler under the systems called the *Propaganda Fide* and *Padroado* respectively. Neither these missionaries had university education nor did they promote education among the native Christians. This was a general situation across the continents. L. Stone puts it in this way: “In the early sixteenth century, the Catholics were fearful of heresy because of Bible study, whereas the Reformers were fearful of the superstition because of lack of Bible Study.” (Stone, 1969) Hence, the Syriac Catholics (present day Syro Malabar Catholics) continued to be illiterate. They were one ethnic group with least higher education. The infamous Synod of Diamper which consolidated the rule of Western missionaries over the native Christians implemented several decisions including those on education. The Synod prohibited Syriac Catholics learning from the people of other religions. (Zacharia, 1994) It also insisted that Syriac Christian tutors should not try anything particular to attract the children of other faiths. (Zacharia, 1994) This narrowed down the scope of educational opportunities for the native Christians.

A 19<sup>th</sup> century report of a Papal Visitor Ignatius Persico states that “the Carmelites who rule the Syriac Christians have not done anything considerable in the educational field. (Paingott, 1996) Though Christians were experts in agriculture and business, there was no significant contribution by Christians in literary circles until 19<sup>th</sup> century.” (Paingott, 1996)

### **Establishment of the Monastery at Mannanam**

Kuriakose Elias joined the seminary after his informal education in an *Ezhuth Kalari* in his village. He was ordained priest at the age of 24 in 1829. (Vellian, 1992) The young priest Kuriakose responded valiantly to the deplorable situation of his community. He collaborated with two other priests to establish the first indigenous catholic religious congregation of India, the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI) in 1831. Though he did not have the fortunes to see the corridors of higher educational institutions, he paved way for one of the largest social movements of the history of Keralam that transformed it to a society with high human development indices. (Kilichimala, 1971) The roles the institutions he founded and nurtured in building up a Christian vision of ethics in identifying and responding to moral and immoral acts, is not small. (Pattassery, 1989)

### **Seminaries for Priestly Training**

Every religion as a social organization has lot to do with the type of priests it has. There is a crucial role for priests in building a respectable image of their religion. If the priests are not trained and formed properly, the collapse of any religion is imminent. Seminaries are centres of training of the clerics. The present day seminary system was originally established by the Synod of Trent (1545-1563). However, many seminaries just did not confine to academic walls of theology and philosophy. It can be seen that many of the famous and ancient European and American Universities were originally established as institutes of clerical training. (Hodge, 2007)

Kuriakose Elias strongly felt the need of proper training centers for the priests of his community. Immediately after founding a monastery at Mannanam in 1831, his attention was to set up a seminary for training priests. He had the strong feeling that only erudite, scholarly and well formed priests could lead the community and augment the society to progress. In 1833, he established the first Seminary of Syriac Christians at Mannanam. This was followed by the establishment of Seminaries at Vazhakulam in 1866 and Elthuruth in 1868. (Pattassery, 1989)

History repeats itself. Mannanam, Vazhakulam, Elthuruth and Pulincunnoo became leading educational centres of Keralam in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The seminary at Mannanam was extended to Chethipuzha with exclusive ecclesiastical education. In 1957, the major

seminary at Chethipuzha was shifted Bengaluru with the name Dharmaram College. It is under this seminary, the first catholic university in India, Christ University, Bengaluru was founded.

### **Establishment of the Sanskrit School at Mannanam**

Saint Kuriakose identified that root cause of the isolation of his community and other lower castes from material welfare was the lack of education. His immediate attempt after establishing seminary was to establish schools. It was with an extraordinary courage that established a school along with the monastery he founded. In 1846, while the monastery was still at its infancy stage he opened a school which admitted students even from lower castes. The medium of instruction in the school was Sanskrit. No wonder why English was not made the medium of instruction then. The authorities of the Catholic Church then were sceptical about the language English which was then considered a channel of the spread of Protestant ideology. This severe attitude of the administrators who came from the Europe had the backing of the Synod of Diamper also. The status that Sanskrit had among the people in the upper layer of the then society might also have influenced him in adopting Sanskrit as the medium of education in this school. Fr. Parappurath Varkey, one of the contemporaries of Saint Kuriakose, recorded about the establishment of this school as, “along this time a Sanskrit school was established as part of the Mannanam Monastery. The priestly inmates and children from the neighbourhood were studying here. A tutor belonging to the *Varyar* community was brought from Thrisur, to run this School. He was well versed both in Malayalam and Sanskrit.” (Parappuram, 1846) Saint Kuriakose was the first Indian who not only dared to admit the untouchables to schools but also provided them with Sanskrit education which was forbidden to the lower castes, thereby challenging social bans based on caste, as early as the former part of the 19th century. (Kokkatt, 1998)

Saint Kuriakose became more enthusiastic by the success of the Sanskrit school at Mannanam. His realization that social inclusion happens only if the education of the society is confirmed was displayed in his subsequent actions. Without much delay he opened another school at the neighbouring village Arpookara. The school at Mannanam was later developed into a high school with boarding house and then to a First Grade College and contributed several outstanding leaders of Keralam. Fr. Parappuram Varkey wrote, “while the work on

the Mannanam School began, a place on the Arpookara Thuruthumali hill was located to build a Chapel and school for the converts from the Pulaya caste. (Parappuram, 1846)

### **Establishment of the Printing Press**

Printing presses were very crucial in popularizing education. The accessibility to education for the masses has been expedited by no other human invention like that of the printing presses. Saint Kuriakose was fully aware of the power of printing. During the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were only two printing presses Keralam. Since he was denied permission to see the press near to his locality, he travelled all the way to Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of the kingdom of Travancore to see the printing press there. He came back and prepared a model of it on his own using the plantain stem. (Ulakamthara, 1971) In 1846, the very same year of the opening of the school, he founded St. Joseph's Press, Mannanam, with a wooden printing press which was the third printing press of Keralam and the first of the Catholics. (Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara Pilgrim Centre, 2015) This printing press also could be the first printing press built in India. It is worthy to note that it is in this wooden press that the first daily in Malayalam, *Nazranideepika*, was printed. (Jacob, 2014)

### **A Visionary Administrator**

In 1861, he was appointed Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Verapoly. Though the actual reason behind his appointment was undoubtedly to avoid further severance and disestablishment of the Catholic Church in Keralam which was administered by the Italian Carmelite missionaries, it paved way for greater social changes in Keralam. A seminal reason behind the unbelievable high literacy in Keralam compared to other states in India, can be traced back to a historical circular of Archbishop Bernadinos that Saint Kuriakose got issued. The circular was about opening schools along with every parish church in the Archdiocese. It instructed that each parish should establish schools, or else they would be closed down and priests suspended. The order that the churches that do not follow the instructions would be closed down had huge impact in creating a revolutionary change in the academic sphere. The circular was written by Saint Kuriakose in his own hand. He did not remain complacent after getting the circular issued. He delegated the members of the CMI Congregation to ensure the implementation of the order and to energize educational activities. Each monastery was to oversee these activities of the parish churches in its neighbourhood. (Plathottam, 1938)

Schools attached to the churches thus became the live wire and symbols of educational activities in Keralam. The high influence and impact of the circular is well noted with etymology of the word *Pallikkoodam* in Malayalam. In Malayalam, the language of Keralam, *Pallikkoodam* means school and *Palli* means church or mosque. Forty years after this monumental circular, there were around 1000 schools in the entire Keralam managed by the Catholic Church. (Tharakan, 1984)

### **A Man who Dreamed High**

Higher education in India was not very well organized during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though there were colleges in some of the cities in India, universities were established only in 1857. News of the establishment of 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 Keralam for nearly a half a century. A letter to the Prefect of the *Propaganda Fide* by the assembly of Syriac clergy on October 5, 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)

From 1600 to 1887, Syriac Catholics of Keralam were forcefully governed by a handful of the Italian missionaries. (Frykenberg, 2008) Under the yoke of the uninspiring and authoritative European missionaries, the exasperated Syriac Catholics and their churches found a ray of hope in a visiting Syriac Catholic bishop, Thomas Roccas, from Bagdad. The administrators of the Church who totally failed to resist the tide of bishop Roccas had but one choice before them – to promote the universally acceptable Kuriakose Elias to the top of the leadership. In June 1861, Archbishop Bernardinos appointed Fr. Kuriakose as the Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Verapoly with wide powers and transferred him to Koonammavu, a place near Kochi. His attachment to the monastery where he spent more than 30 years of active life and the dream to transform Mannanam as a major educational centre did not stand on the way of this great martyr of obedience. He could not return to Mannanam

and due to the busy schedules of the new assignment as Vicar General, his dream of establishing the college remained a dream. He passed away while at Koonammav at the age of 66, ten years later.

### **Educating Women**

Education of women was another pioneering work kick-started by the saint. On February 13, 1866, he founded the first indigenous religious congregation for women, Congregation of the Mother of Carmel (CMC), in India at Koonammav. He wrote in his diaries that the major intention of the establishment of the convent was women's education. (Avila, et al., 2012) Simultaneously with the construction of the convent building, a building for the boarding school for girls called *educumthat*, had also been constructed. (Maria, 2014) In 1867, teaching in the school was commenced with the nuns in the convent as the teachers. At the school apart from teaching language, arithmetic, and catechism, girls were trained in music, stitching and rosary-making. (Avila, et al., 2012) The tremendous progress the women in the locality achieved can easily be assessed from an 1874 letter of Fr. Kuriakose Eliseus Porukkara, the successor of Saint Kuriakose. He wrote to the nuns: "Dear children, I read your letter most happily, again and again. I praise God because the hands that were once engaged to hold the pounding piston and to wash pots and pans, have now *written like this* and also because, you who did not know yourselves or your creator, who did not know how to read properly putting letters together and who like animals, were confined to domestic works, have now been raised to such a great height." (Maria, 2014) The Congregation of the Mother of Carmel with around 6000 professed members is engaged in various ministries that are for the integral development of the women of the society.

### **Social Inclusion through Education: The Original Vision of Saint Kuriakose**

The educational endeavours of the CMI congregation are attributed uniquely to the seminal contributions and inspiration of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara. As of December, 2015, the CMI Congregation runs a University, 50 University Colleges, and 500 Schools. (Thekkedathu, 2015) All these institutions put together have about 300000 students and 9000 teachers. The education imparted in these institutions aims at the formation of the human person for the fulfilment of individual and social responsibilities by growing into adulthood according to the mature measure of Christ. (Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI), 2003)

Saint Kuriakose knew the value of education. When the thought came as to which would be the right platform the Congregation should step into, in order to uplift the community, it was the field of education that blazed bright before him. If the establishment of the Congregation has helped the spiritual growth of the Church in Keralam, the educational activities paved the way for the overall growth of the society. (Vellian, 1992)

### **Conclusion**

Saint Kuriakose had a clear vision on the transformative role of education. He wrote: “As soon as children are able to recognize things, they should be sent to school. Besides, the parents should enquire about their studies and their friendship. Every Sunday, their learning should be checked.” (Chavara, 2014) He entrusted the well-to-do members of the community and the parishes with the responsibility of providing educational facilities for poor students. He also found out viable means to maintain the schools established by him. (Kanjirathumkal, 1978) In considering his contribution towards education, it is not the number of institutions established by him that matters most. Rather it is the new thought process he injected into the consciousness of the society that education is inevitable for its all-round progress and development. He, in fact, had brought light to many lives when he was alive. He wanted to get rid of *jnanakurudatham* (intellectual blindness) and thought education was the only way to it. (Abraham, 2014) Further, he made it obligatory to the parish churches and monasteries to provide the people with learning facilities, in spite of all sorts of inconveniences. This augmented the spread of education. His plans were neither to have any control over the poor nor to win a battle of among the Christian denominations. Because, “all the evidence suggests firstly that one of the main causes for the growth of popular education in the West has been the struggle between the various Christian religious groups for thought control over the poor; and secondly that the Protestants were the first to see the potential value of the school and the printing press as weapons in this battle.” (Stone, 1969) Saint Kuriakose’ vision of education is unique and ever relevant in this regard. It was his vision and farsightedness that enabled the Syriac Catholic community of Keralam reach the enviable position in educational field that it has acquired today. He realized the vast potentials of ‘education’ and his work has played a unique role in the building of modern Keralam. In short, to use ‘education’ as a mission that is inclusive, Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara opened schools for people irrespective of their social status, founded printing press for better spread of knowledge, issued circular to

churches to open schools along with them and founded a congregation for women with the main view of educating women.

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