

“Dear sisters and brothers,

We have gathered here to remember and pay our respects to Saint Chavara who is popularly referred to as Chavara Pithavu, a term which serves as a reflection of the reverence accorded to him. This iconic spiritual and social leader of Kerala, whom people considered as a saint during his lifetime, was a true visionary in every sense of the term. Saint Chavara engaged himself as a spiritual, educational, social, and cultural reformer of Kerala society in the 19th century. Thus, he contributed richly to the social reawakening of the people.

Though the identity and vision of Saint Chavara were shaped and formed on the ideals of his Catholic faith, his deeds of social and educational services were not restricted to the progress and development of that community alone. At the beginning of the 19th century, with a firm belief in inclusivity, he started a Sanskrit school at Mannanam in 1846, which shows his open-mindedness of vision. Through this bold and unconventional move, he opened up access to Sanskrit to aspiring candidates of all castes, genders and religions. Thus, the Sanskrit School showcased an ideal pluralistic community whose members were brought together by a shared desire to learn.

Another path-breaking initiative was the concept of pallikoodam which translated into the setting up of a school alongside every parish church. Such schools initiated in 1864 were open also to children from all communities. The students who received basic education at these schools were also given mid-day meal. This practice had a great impact on the educational efforts at that time as it encouraged the parents to enrol their children in the school.

Saint Chavara contributed immensely to achieving communal harmony and tolerance in society. Being a person with an affable disposition and endowed with simplicity and kindness, he won friends from all walks of life. He always showed a deep concern for the wellbeing of all. Importantly, Chavara taught us that peaceful human relationships are sacred and more important than anything else. Today, we need a Chavara in every community—a towering individual with a vision to unite all sections of society socially and culturally, and take the country forward.

Chavara’s spirituality was in harmony with his vision of science and technology for the common masses. St. Joseph’s Press, established by Chavara here in the year 1846, the first non-government press in Kerala is a good example. It was not a mere setting up of the press. His print house with indigenised technology broke the European monopoly over printing. The printing machine which played a key role in dissemination of knowledge to the common masses conveyed a message to the people—to take pride in self-reliance and be vocal about local. It was by all means Kerala’s prototype initiative in terms of swadeshi and Atmanirbar Bharat.

In the domain of women’s empowerment, with his farsightedness, Saint Chavara provided opportunities for female education and self-reliance by establishing the Carmelite convents and various self-employment training schemes in the mid-19th century. The first task of the nuns was to educate the girls in the region. The formation of edukantat (boarding house) in 1868 was another milestone initiative for realizing this purpose. Women increasingly came forward to join this program which was to bring about a path-breaking social revolution in the years to come. They were taught Malayalam, Tamil, English and Latin. Also, they were trained in various skills like rosary-making, flower-making, sewing, knitting, cooking, music, mathematics and needle work.

Saint Chavara believed that every individual had the right to an honourable life irrespective of his/her caste, creed or gender. He also believed that old age, ill-health, poverty and destitution should not deprive anyone of the right to live in joy and die in peace. Thus, he paved the way in 1869 to start a Dharamshala or upavisala (home for the destitute) at Kainakary in Alappuzha district. Another humanitarian step was the pidiyari (handful of rice) movement, a unique resource mobilization and public distribution system which encouraged people to save a handful (pidi) of rice from their everyday provision for the starving and needy.

Chavara had a passion for learning and reading. He was a scholar in several languages including Sanskrit, English and Portuguese. Chavara treated literature as a powerful means of energising people and his writings are rich in poetic flavour replete with profound spiritual and mystical insights.

As a reformer of families, he wrote authoritatively long before the development of behavioural science about family life: Testament of a loving Father -Oru Nalla Appante Chaavarul- contains tenets for building strong, deep family bonds. The foremost among his appeals in this work was, “a day you have not helped another person shall not be counted in your life”.

Saint Chavara’s accomplishments are many—among them is the founding, along with fellow-priests, of the first Christian indigenous religious congregation for men here at Mannanam known today as Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI) on 11th May 1831 and a religious congregation for women called Congregation of Mother Carmel (CMC) on 13 February 1866.

Saint Chavara combined the spirit of the renaissance with the mission of charity and noble Christian concept of universal brotherhood. I am happy that the involvement of these congregations in the educational and health fields in the South as well as in North India has grown from strength to strength fulfilling the vision of their founder.

I would like to take this opportunity to urge other states to take a cue from Kerala in the fields of education, social justice and women’s empowerment as outlined in the pioneering initiatives of Saint Chavara and Narayana Guru. Their pathbreaking work proves that every state can be transformed into an engine of growth and progress and that this can be achieved through the social and educational empowerment of women and youth belonging to poorer sections of society. As I often say, the benefits of development must percolate down to the last man in the most backward and impoverished segments of our socio-economic order as spelt out in the philosophy of Antyodaya articulated by the visionary thinker, activist and reformer, Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya.

Today, there is a dire need to inculcate the spirit of service from a young age in the youth of this country. Once this pandemic is behind us and normalcy returns, I would suggest that government schools as well as those in the private sector must make community service of at least two to three weeks compulsory for students. It would help them to develop an attitude of sharing and caring in their interaction with others.

As a matter-of-fact, the philosophy of share-and-care is at the core of India’s age-old culture and must be widely propagated. For us, the whole world is one family as encapsulated in our timeless ideal, ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam’. It is with this spirit that we should move forward together.

Thank You.

Jai Hind!”

