

Sadhu Kochukunju Upadesi's Life Story

Website: www.sadhukochukunjuupadesi.com



Sadhu Kochoonju Upadesi was one of the revival leaders who revitalized the spiritual life of the church members. He was a Voluntary Evangelist who spent his whole life for the proclamation of the Gospel to the people of South India and Sri Lanka. According to him the Bible is not a book to be read but an instruction book which should be followed in day to day life.

Kochoonju was born in December 1883 in a village called Edayaranmula near Chengannur in Central Kerala. The name of his house was Muthampakkal. His father Itty was a simple hearted and devoted Christian. His Mother Mariamma was a God fearing, kind hearted and generous person. The first child of Itty and Mariamma was a son who was drowned accidentally in the River Pumba which flows very near to their house. Later they had six daughters and Kochoonju was the youngest and the eighth child in the family. His parents and elder sisters were very keen in looking after Kochoonju and giving him training in Bible reading and prayer. He was brought up under strict Christian discipline of his parents. Kochoonju had his primary education in his village school and his official name in the school records was M. I. Varughese. Right from his childhood he had a keen interest for reading. He had a classmate named K. V. Simon who later became a famous Christian poet and Church Leader.

Child marriage was common during those days. At the age of twelve while he was still a student Kochoonju married Aleyamma of Vattapara house, Kuriannoor. After his marriage he studied two more years in the Poovathoor English School. At the age of fourteen onwards he started helping his father in agriculture. But the thirst for reading was always within him. He used to carry Bible portions with him where ever he traveled.

At the age of eleven he accepted Jesus as his personal saviour during a meeting held in his home parish. While he was 15, his mother died and the burden of looking after his sick father fell on him. Income from the agriculture was not at all sufficient for their living. So he had a hard life and was forced to do many small jobs to make both ends meet. He did textile business, and for some time he taught in a school. His wife's parents were very helpful.

He was a Sunday school teacher for many years. At the age of 17, Kochoonju started his gospel work, which was mainly centered in and around his home parish as he had to look after his sick father. After a day's hard work in the agricultural fields, he used to visit houses in the evenings with a lantern lamp and a Bible in his hand. He arranged area prayer meetings and children's meetings. His parish priest Rev A. G. Thomas and his classmate Mr. K. V. Simon were his strong supporters. Kochoonju was the secretary of an association called Edayaranmula Christian fellowship. Bible study classes

and open air meetings were held under the auspicious of this association in the neighboring villages and parishes. While he was 20 he lost his father.

Kochoonju was a very distinctive person in appearance. He always wore a white shirt and a white dothi. He was 5 feet 9 inches tall and had a very thin and frail body. His eyes appeared to be meditative and his forehead was frowned as though in deep eternal thought. He always carried an umbrella and his favourite Bible where ever he went. His saintly life, self control, self denial, and commitment for social service made him a unique person. He liked to spend time alone in meditation. Much of his time he spent in reading the Holy Scriptures and devotional books. After many days of solitary confinement, meditation and prayer in his house, he committed his life, his wife, children, all his property, possessions, responsibilities, time, future and all his desires to God. He decided to serve the Lord as a full time evangelist on behalf of his home parish, Lakha St. Thomas Mar Thoma Parish, Edayarammala. His commitment to the Gospel restrained him from all worldly pleasures.

Kochoonju wanted all his three children to follow the Lord. He wanted his first son Varghesekutty to be a full time celibate evangelist and his second son Samuelkutty to be an agriculturist to look after his property and his daughter Mariamma, to be a lady evangelist. But unfortunately his second son Samuel died at the age of nine. The death of his son was a big loss in his life which inspired him to write the immortal hymn

“Dukhaththinte paana paathram karthhaventhe kayyil thannaal

Santhoshaththodathu vaangi Halleluiah paadeedum njaan.”

Sadhu Kochoonju was a person who strictly followed self control and self denial. He lived sometimes on only 14 to 19 meals per month. All through the day he fasted and had a meal at night. Every tenth day he avoided solid food, and took only water at night. He was a strict vegetarian most of his life. He could live and work with this type of food pattern for almost thirty years. A divine power gave him strength which is beyond our understanding.

In 1912, he spent much time in fasting and prayer to know the will of God concerning Gospel work. He was burdened by the death of his second son, poverty, responsibility of caring for his wife and children, illness in his own life and inward conflicts regarding different types of Christian faith and practices among the contemporary believers. He had a vision of the Lord Jesus like that of Sadhu Sunder Singh the famous Evangelist. Kochoonju was convinced in his vision that he had to continue the Gospel work for the Lord.

He was one of the few evangelists who fully depended on God for all his needs. Once while conducting a gospel meeting, the parish members presented to him a gold ring. He returned the gold ring saying that he was serving the Lord for things much more precious than gold. His home parish people were willing to pay him a monthly salary but he refused that too. He could not think of such a thing. He considered Gospel work as his duty and for which he was not willing to take any

remuneration or salary. In 1915 the Mar Thoma Metropolitan gave him the authorization to preach and to do gospel work in all the Parishes of the Church.

In the beginning, his meetings were not well attended. Once while conducting a ladies meeting in his home parish there was only one old lady to hear his sermon. But God used this same man to preach to the millions all over South India and Sri Lanka for almost thirty years.

Upadesi always wore simple white clothes as a symbol of his holiness. He always used to carry his Bible holding it close to his chest. He was particular that Christians, especially Christian women should be modestly dressed and should not follow the worldly examples.

He became a popular evangelist very soon. His meetings were held in many places in Kerala. He even went to Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Sri Lanka. Irrespective of creed and caste, people used to attend his meeting. During the Cholera epidemic of 1928 which killed thousands in South Travancore (South Kerala) he worked as a volunteer. Mr. C. M. John who later became the Metropolitan of the Church (Youhanon Mar Thoma) was another volunteer who worked with him. He used to conduct parish conventions from Thursday to Sunday and for almost thirty years he followed this form of preaching.

He always considered himself as a foreigner and sojourner on earth. He was a pilgrim. He had a special relationship with God and God was his one and only refuge and trust. His relation with God was so intimate that he used to call God, Appachen (which means Daddy). His messages were very simple and easy to understand. He showed the common man the greatness of the Cross in the Calvary. He was a sharp and powerful instrument in God's hands. His life itself was his sermon. He could spread the love of God to all who heard him. His life was an open book. He used to speak 2-3 hours at a time. He used to quote parables and examples from every day life in his sermons. He was humorous too. His deep knowledge in the Scriptures made his words more powerful than a strong hammer. He taught new Hymns during his sermons. Millions were saved from their evil ways through his messages. His presence itself was a blessing to many of them. He had a large group of disciples. With the courage of a prophet, he fought against the social evils of his time. He had a deep concern for the unsaved.

The main points of his messages were:

- God is a loving father who takes care of all our needs and there is no need to worry about tomorrow.
- We are all pilgrims in this world and our permanent home is in heaven.
- We are a chosen community and our life, life style, food patterns, dressing patterns should be a model for others. Action speaks better than words.
- We must put our trust in God who is our refuge and strength.

He believed that faith without action is dead. So he gave leadership for the formation of organizations like the YMCA, the Anti dowry movement, the Free School for the Poor Children and the Bible School to train evangelists. He did not stop there. He established a Prayer Hall near his house, orphanages in many places, old age homes, ashrams and a prayer hall cum guest house for traveling evangelists.

Even though Sadhu had little education, he wrote 11 books in prose and poetry and published three weeklies. His books were appreciated by all contemporary writers and critics. Through his books he attacked the social evils of the day. He wrote against the dowry system which made life of many Christian families miserable. In another book he wrote in detail how a Christian should do business. He was always faithful to his Church and his writings never went outside the parameters of the mother Church.

Sadhu Kochoonju Upadesi is always remembered through his Hymns. He wrote a book named “Aaswaasa Geethangal” (Songs of Consolation) in which 210 of his hymns are included. As the name indicates, his Hymns still give comfort to thousands who are broken hearted and in grief. Within 25 years of its publication, more than 50,000 copies were sold. Almost all the Christians irrespective of their differences in faith and creed use the Hymns of Kochoonju Upadesi in their prayer and worship books. His hymns have a divine power and are still sung all over the world in Malayalam worship services and family prayers. His hymns have the power to give hope for the dejected, cure and comfort to the broken hearts, assurance to the faithful worshippers and salvation to the sinners. Most of the hymns are the outward manifestation of his deep spiritual life and experiences. Seventeen out of the 427 Hymns in our Kristheeya Keerththanangal are written by him.

Kochoonju Upadesi was the General Secretary of the Mar Thoma Voluntary Evangelists’ Association from 1924 to 1945. He was also the Manager of the Edayaranmula English Middle school for some time. People of all religions loved and respected him. He practiced what he preached. He had absolute faith in God. He never earned any worldly riches for his children. The glowing Grace in his face was sufficient for his audience.

His continuous travels and restless gospel work made him sick many times. But in 1945 November he became very sick. He was aware of his home call. He was sure that he was going to his ‘Daddy’s’ home. He requested his relatives not to cry when he is called home. He was never afraid of death. As he wrote in his Hymn

“Cherneedume vegam njaanum aa koottaththil

Shuddharodo-nnichcchang- aanandippaan

Lokam venda enikkonnum venda-Ente

Naadhante sannidau chernnal mathi”

(Soon I am going to be with the saints to rejoice with them. I don't want the world or anything in it. I want to be in the presence of my Lord)

He was called home at 8.45 am on Friday 30, November 1945. He was buried in the Lakha St. Thomas Church Cemetery on Saturday afternoon 1 December, 1945. The funeral service itself was a great honour for him. Two Bishops, more than 100 priests and more than 40,000 people participated in the funeral service.

Thanks:

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