

SISTER CHECHAMMA VARKEY
SIHORA ASHRAM
1915 - 1982



LIFE STORY OF SISTER CHECHAMMA VARKEY

(Florence Nightingale of Sihora)

MATHILUNKAL, KUTTAPUZHA, TIRUVALLA

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Sihora Ashram Family 1974

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This is the story of an ordinary Central Travancore woman who did great things for the Lord in the Sihora Taluk (Jabalpur Dist.) in the state of Madhya Pradesh. Like many of us she was born to ordinary parents in a simple Mar Thoma family with limited resources, but when she committed her life into the hands of the Lord; she became the “*Florence Nightingale of Sihora*”. Many were physically and spiritually saved through her selfless service. She was called to her eternal home in 1982; yet she still lives in the hearts of many thousands in the Sihora Taluk. Her life is a thrilling example of sacrifice, devotion and fortitude.

Sihora in Madhya Pradesh

Before independence from British rule, India was divided into more than six hundred kingdoms, provinces, and territories. Some areas were ruled directly by the Britishers, while others were ruled by local Rajas / Kings / Nawabs etc. under British supervision. Sihora Town (head quarters of a Taluk) was located in the Central Provinces (C.P) of the British Raj which later became a part of the present state of Madhya Pradesh in 1956.

Many consider Sihora as the centre point (middle point) of India. (Jabalpur and Nagpur also claim to be centre points). Sihora is about 40km away from Jabalpur town. There are 950 villages in the Sihora Taluk. This area is one of the most under developed parts of India. Out of the 355,000 population, 80% are Hindus and 19% Muslims and the remaining 1% include Jains, Sikhs, Christians, etc. Even now there are many villages without roads, schools, electricity and communication systems (telephone or post office facilities). Low caste people are denied all privileges provided by the government and social service agencies. Untouchability, landlord system, and child marriages are still prevalent in many parts of this taluk. Men are addicted to alcohol and drugs. They don't believe in medical care, but only in mantras and devil worship. For them sickness is a curse from the devil.

Hindus are divided into four main groups or castes. They are Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. Each caste has a traditional occupation such as priest, warrior, merchant or farmer. Each caste has its own rules and behaviour. There is another group called *Untouchables* outside the four main groups and they are treated as the lowest group below Sudras. They do all the menial jobs in the society. About 20% percent of the Indian population comes under this group. Mahatma Gandhi called them Harijans (Children of God). Even today these untouchables are not allowed to enter certain temples and are prevented from drawing water from public wells.

In 1943, the only medical facility available in the area was the medical clinic run by the Mar Thoma Ashram. In 1951, literacy in Sihora was only 18.3%. Today (2004) the rate stands at 64.8 %.

Beginning of the Sihora Ashram

Christa Panthi Ashram, Sihora was established in 1942, under the leadership of Rev. K. T. Thomas, Mr. John Varghese and Mr. M. P. Mathew, who later became ordained ministers of the Mar Thoma Church. Rev. Dr. C.E. Abraham - Principal Emeritus of the Serampore College- was the person who motivated these youths to establish an Ashram in the then Central Provinces (C.P) of India. Rev. Abraham believed that it is the duty of the Indian churches to do the mission work in India. Keeping this in mind, many meetings of the theological students of the Serampore College were held at his residence in Serampore and finally his dreams were fulfilled through the establishment of the Ashram in 1942.

Birth of Chechamma

Chechamma was born on 4 July, 1915, in Mathilunkal family of Annavattom Mar Thoma Parish in Kuttapuzha near Tiruvalla. Mathilunkal is a traditional Christian family of the Tiruvalla area. According to some Christian historians, Mathilunkal, a branch of the famous Pakalomattom Family is one of the first Christian families in Tiruvalla. They are well known for their charitable service and generosity. Chechamma's parents, Kochu Varkey and Mariamma, were very God fearing people and brought her up in strict Christian discipline. The training and vision she received from her parents and dedicated Sunday school teachers inspired her desire to go for Mission work. She accepted Jesus as her personal Saviour during her high school days.

After her school final examination she worked as the Matron of the Mahilayalam (Women's Hostel) in Alwaye. After that she joined the Palakkad Ashram of the Mar Thoma Church. The Palakkad Ashram was established in 1928. During her Ashram life in Palakkad she became aware of the need and importance of the work among women and children. The Palakkad Ashram was the first Ashram of the Mar Thoma Church. Rev. P. John Varghese (who later became Bishop of the St. Thomas Evangelical Church of India) was the founder of this Ashram. He had a God given ability to inspire others to do Mission work in various parts of India. So Chechamma waited for an opening for the mission work. From the Ashram she was sent to the Vanitha Mandiram in Tiruvalla.

Vanitha Mandiram in Tiruvalla

Vanitha Mandiram is a training institute for women established in 1925 by the Mar Thoma Sevika Sanghom. Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionary, Miss. Kellaway from Australia, was the Director / Principal of this institute for many years. Miss. Kellaway's greatest attribute was her ability to inspire others to go for Gospel work. Many of our lady evangelists were her students.

Chechamma joined the Vanitha Mandiram in 1946 for a one year course of Bible study and evangelism. During her studies in Vanitha Mandiram she came to know about the work going on in the Sihora Mission field of the Mar Thoma Church. The Sihora Mission field near Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh was established by the Mar Thoma Church in 1942. The Ashram community has two houses (for men and women) at two different places in the same town. They have adopted celibacy, asceticism and a monastic community model. This community was the only celibate missionary community of the Mar Thoma Church. Their motto is "*THY WILL BE DONE*".

During that time (in 1942), Sihora Taluk was one of the remote areas of Central India without any hospital or educational facilities. Chechamma informed higher authorities of the Church of her desire to go for mission work in Sihora. The Sihora Ashram people were very happy to accept her offer, but they requested her to get some training in nursing before joining the Ashram.

Nursing Training in Madurai- Tamil Nadu.

Chechamma's desire was honored by the Lord and she got admission in the Madurai Mission Hospital in Tamil Nadu for a nursing course. During her four year study there in Tamil Nadu, she became an expert in Tamil. She completed her nursing course with high marks. Her stay in the Madurai Mission Hospital for four years was an added advantage for her future work in Sihora.

To Sihora Ashram - Florence Nightingale of Sihora

On 8 July 1952, Chechamma reached Sihora Ashram. In those days there were no hospitals in Sihora Town or in the villages around it. The only Medical unit was the dispensary at the Ashram. Rev. John Varghese (one of the founding members) had one year medical training from the Thiruppathur Ashram before he joined in the mission work. With his limited knowledge he started the medical work by opening a clinic in the Ashram. Since there were no other medical facilities available in the area it was of great help to all.

But there was no one to look after the medical needs of women and children. Death during child birth was very common. The infant mortality rate was very high. Many of them depended on country medicines / remedies and sought the help of village mid-wives without any medical training.

The arrival of Sister Chechamma was great event in the Medical work of the Ashram. Sister Chechamma was the only trained nurse in that Taluk. A long cherished need of the Ashram was answered through her. Sister Chechamma was an angel for the women of the villages. With other sisters of the ashram, Chechamma visited the villages around Sihora town attending to the medical needs of the women and children. Chechamma was their doctor and nurse. In those days women were not willing to be checked by male doctors. It was a religious and cultural taboo for them. The medical team went to most villages by

foot. There were no roads or other means of transportation available. Some distant places were covered on horse carts.

Evangelism through Medical Work

Chechamma's medical work as a trained nurse opened up a new avenue for the mission work. She was a well respected woman among the villagers and they always kept their homes open for her. Chechamma used to share the love of Christ to all the villagers she met. Her life itself was a living gospel. Many came to know the Lord through her selfless medical work. She saved many villagers lives through proper treatment and care. She was a living god for them. The love and care that she showed to the villagers was better than hundred sermons. She was concerned with each patient's health, and she used to visit and pray for them till they became well.

Due to her sincere efforts and care, infant mortality rate and rate of death rate of mothers dying during child birth were considerably reduced. Through her instigation, girls were sent to school for education. Later a hospital was established along with the Ashram and from 1967; Dr. Sosamma Philip (sister of Dr. Alexander Mar Thoma) served as the Medical Superintendent for 32 years, now she spends her retired life at her home in Kuriannoor.

Presently there are no doctors in the Sihora Mission Hospital. It is very sad to note that there is no one is willing to accept the challenge to work in mission hospitals.

During the past 25 years, hundreds of Protestant Christian hospitals in North India have been closed mainly due to the lack of doctors and nurses. Dedicated young medical graduates (many of them who got medical admission through Church Sponsorship) move away from the mission hospitals after their internship. We need dedicated doctors and medical staff to work in our mission hospitals.

Ashram Life

Chechamma was a dedicated Ashram member and spent much of her time after the medical work in devotion and prayer. She used to have a lengthy morning personal devotion and prayer. According to her "I will see human faces only after seeing the face of my Heavenly Father" and she was able to keep up that principle all through her life. She was a strict disciplinarian in keeping the rules of the Ashram.

Personal Life

Chechamma was a diabetic, but her sickness never hindered her devoted and prayerful life. She led a simple life. She was true to the mottos of the ashram life - Charity, Simplicity and Service. Even though she was the only trained nurse in the clinic for many years, she did her best to attend to all the medical needs of the women who came to the hospital. She was a good team leader. With the help of other sisters from the Ashram she visited almost all the villages in and around Sihora to render the medical services. During

those days there were no awards or merit certificates or medals for those who did excellent service for the Ashram. She never had a desire to go back to her native place in Kerala (Tiruvalla); and she ceaselessly labored for the Lord.

Final Days

For 30 years she worked tirelessly for the Ashram. In November 1982, she became sick and was admitted to the Jabalpur Medical College. She was sure that her race was near its end. *“I say this because I won’t be around to help you very much longer; my time has almost run out. Very soon now I will be on my way to heaven. I have fought long and hard for my Lord and through it all I have kept true to him. And now the time has come for me to stop fighting and rest. In heaven a crown is waiting for me which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that great day of his return.”* 2 Timothy 4:6-8 (The Living Bible).

In the early hours of 29 November 1982, at 5.30 am, she peacefully passed away in the Jabalpur Medical College. She was buried in the Darsani hills of the Ashram. Her tomb at the Darsani Hills is a living testimony. Even years after her death, villagers still used to come in search of their beloved “Nurse Behenji” (Sister). She still lives in the hearts of the many poor and illiterate villagers who came to know the love of God through her.

The Challenge Still Remains.

Chechamma sister has finished her race and now she is with the Lord. The harvest is plenty, but the workers are few. We need lots more persons like Chechamma to work for the Lord. There are millions of villagers in North India who have never heard about our Saviour. Who will go???



Bibliography

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2. Golden Jubilee Souvenir 1992- Christa Panthi Ashram - Sihora
3. Mar Thoma Sabha Directory -1999



Main Events during the time of Sister Chechamma

1914	28 Jun	Beginning of First World War
1915	4 July	Birth of Chechamma in Tiruvalla
1917	27 Dec	Consecration of Abraham Mar Thoma
1918		Sadhu Sunder Singh visits Maramon Convention
1919	14 Feb	Formation of Sevika Sanghom
1919	28 Jun	First World War ends
1924	16 Jan	Mahakavi Kumaran Ashan dies in “Redeemer Boat tragedy”
1924		Formation of Voluntary Evangelists Association
1925		Beginning of the Malayalam wing of the Christian Literature Society (CLS)
1926		Beginning of Palghat Mission
1926		Establishment of Mar Thoma Theological Seminary at Kottayam
1927		Birthday offertory during the church service introduced by Titus II
1928		Establishment of T. A .M. Press
1930		Medical Aid Fund for sick clergy - introduced in the Church by Titus II
1931	19 Jul	Kottarathil Thomas Kathanar - Co - Founder of Evangelistic Association passes away.
1936	27, 28 Dec	Centenary Celebrations of Reformation in Maramon Mar Thoma Church
1937	30 Dec	Consecration of Juhanon Mar Thoma and Mathews Mar Athanasious
1939	Sep	Beginning of Second World War
1940		Beginning of Ankola Mission- North Karnataka
1942		Beginning of Sihora Ashram
1944	4 July	Titus II Mar Thoma passes away
1944		Abraham Mar Thoma becomes Metropolitan
1945	2 Sep	End of the Second World War
1945	30 Nov	Sadhu Kochoonju Upadeshi passes away
1946		Chechamma joins in Vanitha Mandiram for Training
1947	27 June	Beginning of Hoskote Mission, near Bangalore city, Karnataka
1947		Beginning of the Women’s branch of the Sihora Ashram.
1947	14 July	Punchamannil Mammen Upadeshi passes away.
1947	15 Aug	Freedom for India
1947	1 Sep	Abraham Mar Thoma Passes away
1952	8 July	Chechamma joins the Sihora Ashram
1967	Oct	Silver Jubilee of the Ashram
1971		Beginning of Shanthi Bhavan- Destitute Home.
1973	1 Dec	Dr .Mathews Mar Athanasius Episcopa passes away.
1976	27 Sep	Dr. Juhanon Mar Thoma Passes away
1976	26 Oct	Alexander Mar Thoma becomes Metropolitan
1982	29 Nov	Sister Chechamma Passes away



Notes

Sihora Ashram: Christa Panthi Ashram, Sihora was established in 1942, under the leadership of Rev. K. T. Thomas, Mr. John Varghese and Mr. M. P. Mathew, who later became ordained ministers of the Church. Sihora is about 40 km away from Jabalpur, in Madhya Pradesh (Christa Panthi Ashram, Darsani Post- 483225, Sihora, Madhya Pradesh)

Palakkad (Palghat) Ashram : Christu Dasa Ashram (first Ashram of the Mar Thoma Church) Palghat was established in 1928. Rev. P. John Varghese (Palakkattachen- who later became the Bishop of the St. Thomas Evangelical Church of India) was the founding leader of this Ashram. (Christu Dasa Ashram, Olive Mount Post-678702, Palghat, Kerala)

Vanithamandiram in Tiruvalla : The Vanitha Mandiram was established in Tiruvalla in 1925. At the Vanitha Mandiram, women were given training in Mission work, home science and home management, kitchen gardening, etc. in addition to Biblical studies. An Australian missionary Miss Kellaway was the principal of this institution for 20 years. During the early years many women were trained for Missionary work and sent to various places outside Kerala. Sister Chechamma (Mathilunkal, Kuttapuzha, Tiruvalla), Miss K. J. Aleyamma, Miss P. O. Sosamma, Miss Mariamma John, Miss P. G. Aleyamma (Sihora Ashram) and Mrs. Mariamma Joseph (Manon, Maramon—one of the co-founders of the Hoskote Mission) were students of the Mandiram. The main mottos of the Institution are Prayer, Worship, Study, Witnessing, and Discipline. In 1946, Miss Kellaway went back home to Australia.

Founding Members : Rev. K. T. Thomas (1909-1989) (Karimprampil, Anaprampal) Rev. John Varghese (1915-1987) (Valethu Thoppil, Puthen Cavu, Chengannur) and Rev. M. P. Mathew (1914-2004) (Mavelil, Kaviyoor) were the founding members of the Ashram.

Rev. Dr. C. E. Abraham : (1898-1985) Chruthottathil, Kozhencherry was the Professor/Principal of the Serampore Theological College from 1925-1959. He was the General Secretary of the Yuvajana Sakhyam, General Secretary of the Evangelistic Association and Editor of the First Mar Thoma Church Directory.



CHRISTA PANTHI ASHRAM, DARSANI, SIHORA

Life of the Ashram Community

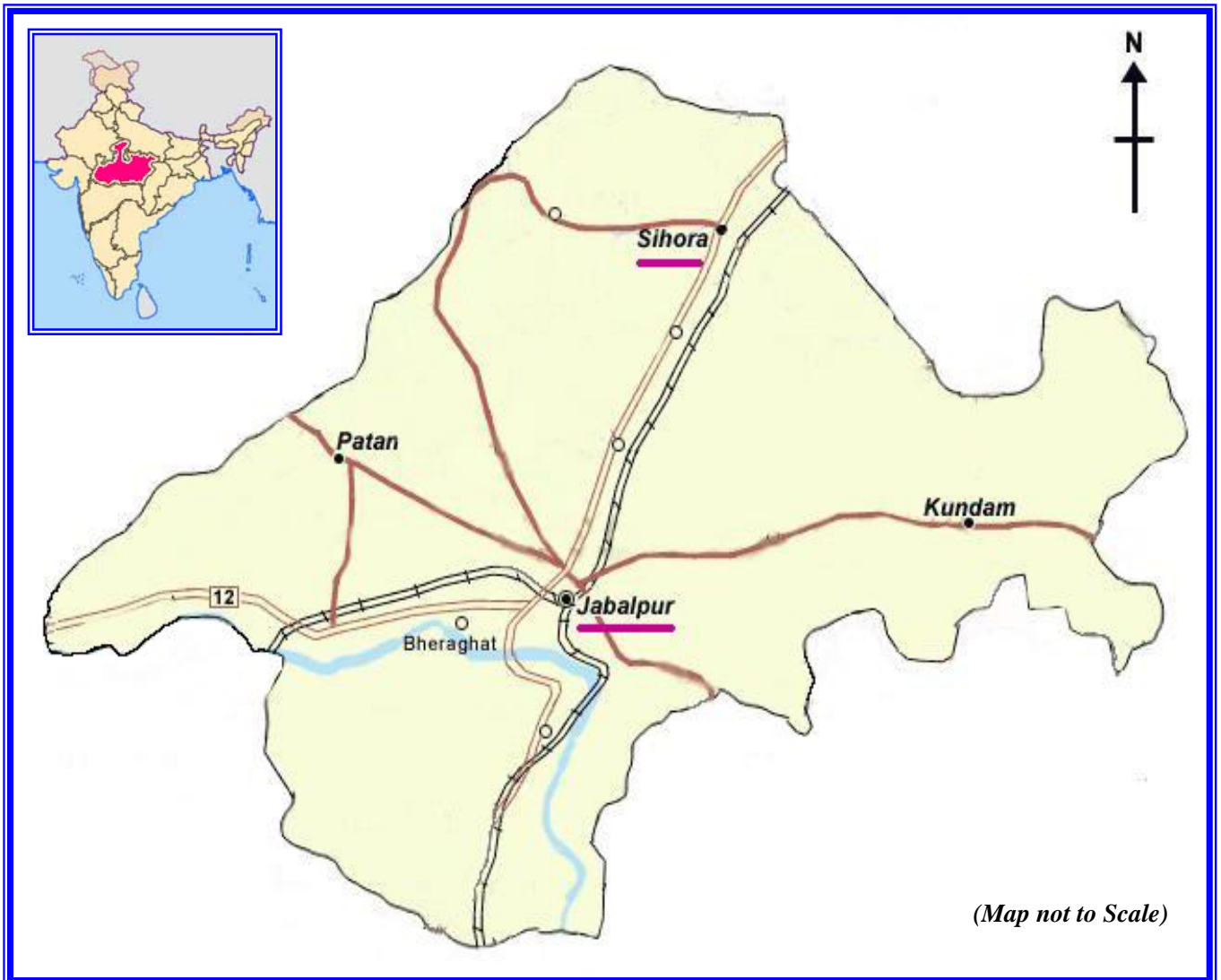
5 .00 am	Rising bell
5.30 - 6.30	Morning worship, Bible study
6.00 - 7.00	Private Devotion
7.00 - 8.00	Cleaning rooms, Courtyard etc
8.00 - 8.30	Breakfast
8.30 - 12.00	Work
12.00 noon	Intercession
12.30 - 3.00 pm	Lunch & Rest
3.00 pm	Meditation of the Cross
3.30 - 6.00	Work
7.00 - 7.30	Sandhya Meditation
8.30	Supper
9.30 pm	Vespers
10.00 pm -7.00 am	Silence

Membership Pledge of the Christa Panthi Ashram in Sihora

*Desiring to consecrate my life to
God's Glory through the doing of
His Will as a member of the Christa
Panthi Sangh, I will endeavour
faithfully to fulfill all obligations
and responsibilities laid upon me
by my vows and to keep the rule
of life arranged for me in
consultation with
the Acharya*



Jabalpur (Madhya Pradesh)



Sihora is in Jabalpur District, Madhya Pradesh,
India

The End

Note From Author

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All For His Glory

