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THE LIBERATION THOUGHTS AND STRUGGLE OF IYOTHEE THASS IN COLONIAL TAMIL NADU

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ABSTRACT:

In the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries C. Iyothee Thass , was one of the intellectual leaders who sprang from the Depressed Classes and worked for their betterment and welfare. He moved with prominent leaders like Blavatsky, Annie Besant and Col.Olcott of the Theosophical Society. He established Panchama Schools in the of various locations of the Madras City and had good knowledge on various religions. He embraced Buddhism and propagated the principles and teachings of Buddhism among the Depressed Class people. He expressed the social emancipation of the Depressed Classes was possible by embracing Buddhism and adopting its principles. With the help of Col.Olcott, he converted many Depressed people of Tamil Nadu to Buddhism .He inculcated self-confidence among them by spreading the message that they were the originally Buddhists. He started a magazine Tamizhan and through the columns of it , he ventilated the grievances of the Depressed Classes and the magazine and his associations spread abroad also. As a matter of fact, he led the neo-Buddhist Movement and became the pioneer of B.R. Ambedkar.



KEY WORDS: Iyothee Thass, Buddhism, Depressed Classes, Brahmins, Tamil Nadu, Olcott, Tamizhan, Congress, Dravidian.

INTRODUCTION:

The emergence of the Brahmins within the colonial public sphere, along with their redefined and prominently displayed forms of power, led to the creation of various discourses. Although the colonial public sphere was limited due to racial discrimination, it fostered network of organizations related to associational life in the Madras Presidency. In principle, this public sphere was open to all segments of the colonized population, irrespective of their ascriptive identities. Just as the Brahmins could express their opinions, the Untouchables were also able to voice their concerns and grievances through the publication of tracts and periodicals, the establishment of organizations, and other means—provided they could gather sufficient material resources and acquire the new cultural competencies required by the colonial public sphere.

During the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, Untouchables, Sudras, neo-Buddhists, Saivites, and Rationalists in the region actively engaged in discussions and writings concerning the Brahmins. Frequently, it was the Brahmins' novel forms of power, bolstered by their heightened public visibility, that provoked these groups into dialogue. This 'talkativeness' surrounding the Brahmin figure resulted in a complex web of new meanings, both regarding the Brahmin himself and others.

The Brahmins, influenced by colonialism and supported by emerging forms of knowledge, constructed competing self-representations that redefined both themselves and others. In light of the new frameworks of understanding established by colonialism, these representations engaged with concepts such as hygiene, labor division, race, and more.

Among the intellectuals of colonial Tamil Nadu was Pandit C. Iyothee Thoss, a Depressed Class intellectual who sought to transcend his perceived demeaning Depressed Class identity by adopting a neo-Buddhist identity in the early Twentieth Century.¹ Pandit endeavored to reshape a new self-concept for their respective communities by placing the Brahmin at the centre of their intellectual and dialogical writings. He exemplified traditional intellectualism in the Tamil region, where textual analysis and religious discourse were the primary means of cultural engagement. These forms of textual analysis and debate were largely restricted to the scholarly realm and were relatively inaccessible to subaltern groups. In essence, Iyothee Thoss initiated his critiques of the Brahmin and his authority predominantly within the cultural sphere.

C.Iyothee Thass (1845-1914) was born into a Depressed Class family. The early period of Iyothee Thoss remains largely unknown. He was a scholar of Tamil classical literature, a prominent practitioner of indigenous siddha medicine, and a commentator on the political landscape of his time. He was well-acquainted with Sanskrit, Pali, English and of course Tamil. He had a good philosophical thought of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam and Christianity. In 1870, he established the Advaidananda Sabha to counter the efforts of Christian missionaries and to explore advaidic traditions as a means to challenge caste-based discrimination. His contempt for Christian missionaries might have stemmed from the widespread caste exclusivity found within Christian congregations. In reaction to a proposal by S. Srinivasa Raghava Aiyangar, the Inspector General of Registration, suggesting that conversion to Christianity and Islam would empower Untouchables, he remarked that in certain Catholic Churches, separate seating was designated for Pariahs, who were often regarded with contempt as low caste individuals, causing them significant emotional distress. Even in the Protestant Churches of some nations, they faced similar insults and were occasionally barred from participation in Church services and the Lord's Supper.² In 1891, he established the Dravida Mahajana Sabha in the Nilgiris, aiming to persuade the Indian National Congress to address the civic disabilities endured by the Depressed Classes.³ However, the Indian National Congress declined to respond to his appeal.

In 1898, he travelled to Ceylon with the assistance of Theosophist Henry Olcott and adopted Buddhism. Upon his return from Colombo, he established the Sakya Buddhist Society in Madras within the same year. This initiative received support from Olcott and later from Annie Besant. The society's activities encompassed religious meetings on Sundays, semi-public lectures addressing socio-religious topics by esteemed individuals from various faiths and confessions, as well as conversions to Buddhism.⁴ Iyothee Thass also played a key role in founding several branch societies in different areas of the Tamil region.

As early as 1898, Iyothee Thass organized public meetings to highlight the deplorable state of the Depressed Classes who were believed to be the original Dravidian inhabitants of South India. In order to lend strength to these campaigns, Iyothee Thass kept links with prominent politicians like P.Varadarajulu Naidu, known for their attitude towards the Depressed Classes. Further, Iyothee Thass and his trusted followers, G. Appaduraiyar and P.Lakshmin Narasu developed the concept of the mass movement to liberate the socially backward Depressed Classes.⁵

Arguably, the most significant event in the life of Iyothee Thoss was the establishment of the weekly magazine, *Oru Paisa Tamizhan* (One Paisa Tamizhan), in 1907.⁶ He served as the editor of the magazine until his passing on 5th May 1914⁷, and it became a crucial platform for his wide-ranging intellectual endeavours and exposures.⁸ The purpose behind launching this magazine was explicitly educational, to impart justice, the right path, and truthfulness to individuals who were unable to

distinguish between the excellent, the mediocre, and the inferior.⁹ A considerable collection of Thoss's writings, which included his reinterpretation of Tamil history, commentaries on significant literary works such as the *Thirukkural*, and his views on contemporary politics, especially regarding the Swadeshi Movement, were published in *Tamizhan*.

In the Tamil region, the latter part of the Nineteenth Century witnessed intermittent yet resolute efforts by Depressed Classes to express their suffering and indignity, alongside a desire to reconnect with their original Dravidian heritage. In this context, it was straightforward to assign linguistic, ethnic, and indigenous identities to the non-Brahmins, who spoke a language of non-Sanskrit origin, recognized as Dravidian or Tamil. Their current oppression and distorted historical narrative were blamed on the foreign invasion by Brahmins, who were seen as descendants of the Aryan conquerors. Such reinterpretations of history were supported by the prevailing circumstances in the area, reinforcing the belief that the Brahmins of South India were still scheming to suppress the Dravidian people and their cultural identity.

In this environment, Dravidian radicals embraced their indigenous and independent Tamil literary traditions in their struggle for social and political equality. By highlighting the pre-Sanskrit and non-Aryan Dravidian legacy of the south, numerous Tamil Sangams were established in cities such as Madurai and Madras. The renewed interest in ancient Tamil literature led to the publication of various journals that criticized the foreign and oppressive Brahmanic culture. The Ramayana was reinterpreted to celebrate Ravana, portraying Rama as the antagonist. The killing of Shambuk, the Depressed Class boy, by Rama was lamented and vehemently condemned. The Dravidar Kazhagam, founded in 1886¹⁰, raised and discussed the ideological framework of Dravidianism. As the Twentieth Century approached, the groundwork was laid for the rise of a formidable non-Brahmin Movement in the region.

Iyothee Thass became a committed Buddhist, emerged as a prominent figure in the socio-cultural awakening that set the stage for the remarkable rise of a Dravidian -Non-Brahmin Movement in Tamil Nadu.¹¹ An ideologue and cultural advocate, Iyothee Thass introduced innovative ideas and initiatives that paved the way for the subaltern struggle for identity, human dignity, and justice. Recognizing the liberating potential of the Buddhist tradition and reflecting on the historical Tamil-Buddhist connection, Iyothee was the first to analyze the history, religion, and literature of the Tamils through the lens of Buddhism's presence in the region. His writings, along with the contributions of associates like Masilamani, form a body of work that embodied a Buddhist perspective on India's past. Combining elements of history and polemic, their writings foreshadowed, in many respects, the historiographical contributions of B.R. Ambedkar.¹² More significantly, they anticipated and, to some degree, intersected with the emerging Dravidianism, which established a completely new historiographical tradition. This movement, countering the Aryan narrative of history, articulated a historical consciousness that was assertively Tamil and dismissive of what it perceived as the Aryan influence in Indian culture.¹³

It is not widely recognized that Iyothee Thass was the forerunner of what is presently referred to as neo-Buddhism in India. Operating from Madras, in 1898 he established at Royapettai the South Indian Buddhist Association¹⁴, which by 1910 had numerous branches both in India and internationally.¹⁵ Tamil Buddhism was developed on the foundation of castelessness, as the introduction of the caste system by the Aryan-Brahminic influence in a previously casteless area was viewed as a significant factor contributing to discriminatory distinctions in public life, both secular and sacred. According to Aloysius, what was noteworthy about Tamil Buddhism was its capacity to evolve and express the issues faced by the marginalized and caste-oppressed, transforming them into a universal vision of liberation for all. Subaltern issues—such as welfare initiatives for the upliftment of the impoverished, the elimination of civil disabilities for the Depressed Classes, and so forth—were perceived there as being inextricably linked to those of the broader society; sectional liberation was inconceivable without concurrently implementing a comprehensive structural transformation. This was achieved through nuanced shifts in focus: from ascriptive groups to organizing principles and from sectarian fixation to a universal perspective. The liberating strategies of a faith for the oppressed were inherently contrary to those of the oppressors.¹⁶

Iyothee Thass, who was at the forefront of this movement, also led an initiative aimed at promoting education among the Depressed Classes. Together with his colleagues, he established numerous schools for lower caste communities within urban areas. A Tamil scholar and practitioner of Siddha medicine, he operated a well-known weekly publication, *Tamizhan*, for many years. In addition, he produced a multitude of pamphlets and tracts authored by himself and his associates, which were extensively distributed among Tamils everywhere. The articles he contributed to *Tamizhan* reflected the remarkable breadth of his interests: caste dominance, untouchability, traditional medicine, agricultural customs, folk deities, matters related to census and conversions, as well as Buddhism and Jainism in Tamil Nadu. His writings are strikingly contemporary, not only for their profound understanding of societal dynamics but also for advocating social liberation, Buddhism, rational thought, and the emerging egalitarian Dravidian identity.

Iyothee Thass was one of the earliest non-Brahmin, Depressed Class intellectuals who provided a systematic and incisive critique of Brahminical authority, the role of Brahmins in contemporary society and governance, and, most importantly, the Brahmin's support of a contentious form of nationalism.¹⁷ He highlighted the widespread civil injustices and various forms of social and ritual discrimination that maintained Brahmin exclusivity. He referenced numerous examples of bias and discrimination not only from Brahmin advocates of nationalism but also from the predominantly Brahmin-owned media and the Brahmin publicists who shaped and influenced public opinion. It is noteworthy that he identified the power of the modern, secular Brahmin in the control he wielded over the formation of public opinion. On numerous occasions, he emphasized the caste prejudice and animosity evident in the framing and portrayal of events or viewpoints in the Brahmin-dominated nationalist media.¹⁸ Disturbed by the Brahmin's tendency to reinforce his caste status and to favour his own caste members whenever in positions of authority, he contended that a caste so entrenched in its own interests and that forcibly appropriated the interests and concerns of others could hardly be deemed national or representative.¹⁹

Iyothee Thass connected the unrepresentative characteristics and content of the Brahmin-led swaraj and swadeshi initiatives to a flawed epistemological framework and a biased worldview.²⁰ By examining the Brahminical perspective and its harmful consequences, he deemed all Brahminical knowledge as unproductive and passive, arguing that it fostered laziness and reduced understanding to mere superficiality. He contended that the Brahmin's contemplative knowledge prevented him from applying that knowledge to practical work and action.²¹ Detached from the realm of creativity, his intellectual efforts were wasted on trivial tasks such as establishing the rules of touchability, visibility, and approachability. Furthermore, his long-standing engagement in religious inquiry perpetuated the emergence of new creeds, each asserting its own claims to truth and wisdom through endless nitpicking and convoluted reasoning. According to Iyothee Thass, this worldview and knowledge system had remained unchanged despite the Brahmin's attainment of modern education; he was more focused on showcasing his command of English grammar than on articulating coherent, useful, and relevant thoughts or ideas. Unsurprisingly, the new political ideal generated by the grotesque and insular knowledge system of the Brahmin appeared to Iyothee Thass as fundamentally flawed and inadequate, much like the tradition that shaped it. He was highly critical of elitist nationalism, asserting that unless this nationalism addressed the concerns and anxieties of the producing masses and learned to communicate in the language of the people, it could not be either representative or effective.²²

Iyothee Thass constructed a historical narrative of Tamil Buddhism that included the Depressed Classes and Brahmins. In a letter dated 1898 addressed to Henry Olcott, in which he sought assistance to revive Buddhism in the Madras Presidency, Thass provided insight into his exploration of the history of the Depressed Classes. This endeavour commenced early in his life as he sought to understand a prevalent ritual practice within his community. When individuals identified as Brahmins entered the villages and streets inhabited by the common people, who were the original Dravidians but were then referred to as 'Panchamas' by the Hindu high-caste individuals. The Brahmins were expelled from the area in a most disgraceful manner amidst chaos and uproar, based on the belief that the locations they had stepped on have become polluted. The method employed to eliminate the impurity thus created involved cleansing the areas trodden by these so-called Brahmins with cow-dung, and the containers

used for this purpose are disposed of beyond the boundaries of such towns. This practice was akin to the treatment given when a person died and the body was removed from the residence. Such was the animosity that existed between these two social classes. Iyothee Thass began to investigate the reasons for such hostility between the two groups from the time when he was capable of independent thought. Such ethnographic interest was not unusual among the native intelligentsia during this period.²³

As a pioneer Depressed Class leader, the thoughts and activities of Iyothee Thass invigorated the feelings of the Depressed Class people. By his writings and speeches he goaded the Depressed Class people to a right path. As a Buddhist, he believed in the principles of Buddhism. He maintained a good relationship with the Theosophical leaders of his times. He strongly criticized the Hinduism and Brahmins. He reiterated that the Brahmins were responsible for the lower position of the Depressed Classes in Tamil Society. He exposed his thoughts through the columns of his own magazine, *Tamizhan*. He was the founder of the Dravida Mahajana Sabha and also organized many Buddhist societies. During his period, he started the Neo-Buddhist Movement. He considered Buddhism as an emancipatory religious ideology. He was the proponent of the Dravidian and Tamil Identity. He asserted the richness of the Tamil literature and heritage. He openly stated that the Brahminized varna based society was a great hurdle for the liberation of the Depressed Class people from the age long servitude. He was a charismatic leader of the Depressed classes and he dedicated his whole life for their liberation from all forms of suppression and oppression.

END NOTES

1. Iyothee Thass as a Parayar intellectual because he self-consciously differentiated Paraiyars as superior to other Untouchable communities. According to him, Kuravar, Villiar, Chakkiliar and scavenging Thottis were by nature lowly. He also resented the fact that Parayars were called Panchamas along with these groups. Aloysius, G., (ed.), *Iyotheedasar Chinthanikal* (Tamil) (Thoughts of Iyothee Thass) ,Vol. I, Palayamkottai: Folklore Resources and Research Centre, 1999, pp.97 and 469.
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17. Geetha, V., and Rajadurai, S.V., *Towards A Non-Brahmin Millennium , From Iyothee Thass to Periyar,op.cit.*, p.42.
18. *Ibid.*, p.63.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, p.66.
21. *Tamizhan*, 28 October 2008
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