
Research Papers



THE ROLE OF PANDIT IYOTHEE THASS TO THE ELEVATION OF DEPRESSED CLASS IN TAMIL NADU

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Abstract

The late Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries witnessed the rise of several Subaltern Leaders who took up the cause of the Depressed Classes and worked for their elevation with complete dedication. These Leaders came from all walks of life and from all castes and creeds. They led exemplary lives and practised what they preached. They tried to improve their conditions by exhorting the Scheduled Caste to follow cleanliness, good habits and obtain education and to break down the Social Barriers by propagating and educating themselves. The efforts of these individual Leaders went a long way in improving the condition and Status of the Scheduled Castes. One of the notable leaders is pandit iyothee dass. 1

The life and career of Pandit Iyothee Thass and his historical writings on Oru Paisa Tamizhan, which contributed much to the Subaltern Consciousness among the Depressed Class, was noteworthy. In the first part of the Chapter, the life and organizational works of Iyothee Thass are dealt with. In the second part, his contribution to the Depressed Class and Dravidian Awakening and his literary works in the promotion of Depressed Class by propagating Buddhist Thoughts, is taken for detailed analysis. In the third part, his thoughts on various public issues which came to public attention through the columns of Oru Paisa Tamizhan or Tamizhan, are focused.

Life and Organisational Works

Iyothee Thass was born in Nilgiris in 1845 and his father was Kandaswamy. His original name was Kathavarayan. As his teacher's name was Iyothee Thass, Kathavaraya changed his name into Iyothee Thass. He also obtained the title of

Pandit. He was also a popular Siddha Doctor. He viewed religion as security for the rich only. He was involved in the Rationalist Movement, Self Respect Movement, Justice Party, Dravidian Movement, and the Movement for Eradication of Untouchability and Caste System.

Initially, he was attracted to Advaita Vedanta as evidenced by his role in the foundation of the Advaidananda Sabha in 1870 in Nilgiris.² His activities in the Sabha were directed against the proselytizing activities of the Christian Missions among the tribal people of the region. He founded Dravida Mahajana Sangham in 1881 and its first Conference was held on 1 December 1891 at Ooty.³ Ten resolutions were passed in that conference. Iyothee Thass moved from Nilgiris to Chennai where he created one Buddhist Temple in 1896.⁴ He founded the Chakya Buddhist Sangham in 1898 in Madras.⁵

He married Dhanalakshmi, and the couple were blessed with six sons and two daughters.⁶ He

called the Scheduled Castes as 'Poorva Tamzhars' or 'Adi Tamizhars'. He started the South Indian Sakiya Buddhist Association at Royapettai in the year 1902.⁷

He published a small book for students about Buddhism which was on the question and answer pattern and it created much awareness. He talked about the preachings and teachings of Buddha in the name of the Arungkalai Cheppu in the Buddhist Association Meeting. Iyothee Thass was a follower of Lakshmi Narasu who followed Buddhism because there is no god, avathar, no yoga, no prayer, and no prayer rules etc.

Iyothee Thass was one of the authors of the Madras University Tamil Lexicon in 1913.⁸ He was a forerunner to Singaravelu and Periyar and Ambedkar in the field of the Rationalism.⁹ Iyothee Thass gave Ayurvedic Treatment to the ailing T.V.Kalyanasundara Mudaliar.¹⁰

He started a weekly journal called Oru Paisa Tamizhan on 19th June 1907 and its price was 'one paisa'. On 26th August 1908, the name, Oru Paisa Tamizhan, was changed into Tamizhan.¹¹ He published Tamizhan from 1907 to 1914. From 17th June 1914 to 26th August 1915, Tamizhan was published by Wilson Patabiraman and then from 7th July 1926 to 27th June 1934, Kolar Goldvaiyal Pandithamani Appadurai published it.

He viewed Puranas as false. He wrote a book called, 'Kapaliswara Charithira Araichi'. He wrote another article in Tamizhan entitled, 'Veputhi Arachi' which deals with the false information in Puranas.

He asserted that there was no caste, no religion, no varna for Adi-Dravidas. Hence at the time of Census 1881, Adi Dravidas were mentioned only as Adi Tamizhians. In 1888, Iyothee Thass maintained that Adi Tamizhians were not Hindus. In this regard, he wrote an article in Tamizhan. In 1912, he wrote an article entitled, 'Poorva Tamil Oli' in Tamizhan. He viewed Brahmins to be responsible for the downfall of the Hindu Society.¹²

Contribution to Subaltern Consciousness

Iyothee Thass, a much neglected intellectual of the late Nineteenth Century in Tamil Nadu, was a pioneer in Rationalism and a leading figure in political, social, literary and philosophical spheres. He was a great Tamil Scholar. His writings reveal a person well acquainted with Sanskrit, Pali, English and Tamil. He seems to have been conversant with the philosophical thoughts of Hinduism, Buddhism,

Jainism, Islam and Christianity¹³

He wrote 325 political, 55 literary, 51 social, 109 religious articles in Tamizhan. On 3rd February 1909, he wrote an article about voting right to minority.¹⁴ Iyothee Thass's teachings nurtured and shaped the career of Rettamalai Srinivasan and M.C. Rajah in Tamil Nadu.

Iyothee Thass wrote several articles in the Tamizhan explaining the historical evolution of the society, religious traditions and cultural patterns of Tamil Nadu. Dalit political discourses dominated the columns of Tamizhan. These bring out a systematic argument of the first ever Depressed Class Ideology in Tamil Nadu.

Iyothee Thass critically analysed the historical and social structure of Depressed Class Society which provided an ideological base to the succeeding Depressed Class Political Movement. His writings on Paraiyars' history and their identity enlightened the Depressed Class.¹⁵

According to him, Paraiyars were the original inhabitants of this land. They followed Buddhism. Paraiyars were degraded and their religion systematically destroyed when the Aryan invaders from the North imposed their rule and culture on these original Tamils. He called Depressed Class People, 'Poorva Thamizhar' with a glorious past.¹⁶

In Indirar Desa Charithram (History of the Country of Indrars), Iyothee Thass declared that in the past, the Subcontinent was known as 'Indirar Desam' or the 'Land of Indirar'. Indirar was none other than the Buddha who had managed to control his five senses successfully. His knowledge prompted him to arrive at the conclusion that the Panchamas were not Hindus but 'Adi Thamizharhal' (Original Tamils).¹⁷

Iyothee Thass also wrote at length on Buddhism, the life of Buddha, his readings, the dialogues he had with his disciples, and on the principles of faith and action which he upheld. A regular column, 'Poorva Tamil Oli' was devoted to this purpose in Tamizhan. Iyothee Thass was also a prominent Rationalist Reformer and a Depressed Class Political Thinker in the early decades of the Twentieth Century. Combined with his early commitment to Buddhism, rational thinking in him produced large hearted and magnanimous personality.

Iyothee Thass's 'The Buddha and His teachings' were primarily embodied within Tamil Dravidian Traditions, contesting the conservative Vedic perspective of the Indian cultural and historical traditions. It is to be reconstructed on the

main force of socio-cultural rationality.¹⁸

Iyothee Thass pursued a relentless and sustained campaign against swadeshi reforms while writing in his *Oru Paisa Thamizhan*. He viewed that there did exist a castiest edge to swadeshi pronouncements.¹⁹

Iyothee Thass's re-reading of history and literature reflected a concern and anxiety over the Semitic import of the term, 'Paraiyah'. He vehemently condemned the nationalist social reformers for addressing Depressed Class People as the Paraiyas and Chandalas.

He observed that for him and his people, the advent of the white Man ushered in the liberation of subaltern class because the British brought with them a learning that was available to all and caste-indifferent.²⁰

He argued that the text, *Thirukural*, was originally known as *Thiri-kural* (*thiri* means three) and it was the first Buddhist Text in a Dravidian Language. The *Kural* content adhered to the three *Pitakas* of the Buddha's Teachings and hence it was known as the *Thirukural*.²¹

Iyothee Thass strongly articulated the idea of Communal Reservation and good residential place for Depressed Class which later became the political agenda of the Non Brahmin Movement.

In his speeches and writings, Iyothee Thass strongly supported reservation for Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Anglo Indians and Europeans in Panchayat, Municipality, Education, Police and so on. The idea of Communal Reservation was articulated in 1885. This scheme advocated financial assistance to poor students of the Depressed Class.²²

Iyothee Thass derived his own intellectual experience from the egalitarian traditions of the Siddhas and the philosophy of Buddhism. The ideology of Iyothee Thass not only provided a distinct identity to the Depressed Class and helped them to strengthen their position in the society but also envisaged their total emancipation. His vision of the future of the Depressed Class and their emancipation was rooted in his construction of their meaningful past which rationally condemned Hinduism. Thus he laid the foundation for the future Identity Movement of the Depressed Class. The most articulate expression of this rejection of Hinduism is found in Iyothee Thass's own analyses that stressed the importance of overthrowing the Hindus religious ideological hegemony as a necessary condition for the liberation of Depressed Class.²³

The Buddhist Press and the Gauthama

Press in Madras and later the Siddhartha Press in Kolar Gold Fields became the rallying point for the propagation of the new social and religious World View and Ideology. In confirmation of his historical insight, Iyothee Thass observed that in several temple festivals of the Tamil Region, the Parayars, who were normally considered as polluting, were given symbolic pre-eminent status in recognition of their earlier dominance and prominence in the Sacred Realm.

The innumerable popular religious myths, beliefs and practices and the general folk and oral traditions of the Sub-Continent, appear to be connected to one another and the Sanskritic Brahmanism looked different from this new angle. All these were indeed grounded in an earlier and morally universal truthful unity of Buddhism. Further, his research on the Tibetan, Burmese and Ceylonese popular religious lore and practices, with assistance from the visiting bhikkus and scholars and the study of the Pali languages, led to the confirmation, elaboration and enrichment of Iyothee Thass's interpretative writings.²⁴

Iyothee Thass advocated a form of social ideology (Freud) or critique of ideology (Marx) or critical hermeneutics (Habermas) as the first inevitable step towards the emancipation of the Depressed Class which at the same time would engender a morally united larger society.

Iyothee Thass continuously explained, interpreted and justified his formulation of the New Rational Religion, not only to his many adversaries but also to his numerous followers and sympathizers. This very process carried, through the medium of the *Journal, Tamizhan*, and several of booklets, not only helped in the classification and reasoning out of beliefs and practices but also strengthened the collective resolve of the emerging group to go ahead in the chosen path.

Under the leadership of Iyothee Thass, new forms of birth, marriage and death ceremonies and, collective and democratized systems were developed for practice by the emerging Ideological Community. The vast, more than two millennia old living tradition, was traversed and explained by Iyothee Thass to produce source materials for constructing the Tamil version of Modern Buddhism.²⁵

Iyothee Thass, with the help of Col. Olcott, set up five schools in the City, specifically for the Depressed Class. It was from these schools that the first generation of leaders and ideologues emerged.

Elements of language and elementary

principles of morality are learnt simultaneously in the Tamil Tradition. Similarly the practice of the Tamil – Siddha Medicine goes hand in hand with a critique of Ascriptive Discriminations. The issues of injustice to the Depressed Class Subalterns, when brought to the notice, were taken up with the authorities. The new found print media was exploited effectively in order to highlight, publicize and rectify wrongs committed against the Subaltern Class who gained self-confidence and authority in the process. The media was also used for the construction of the new world of modern symbols.²⁶

In the beginning of the Twentieth Century, Pandit Iyothee Thass was one of the leaders who sprang from the Scheduled Castes and worked for their betterment. As a humble native Medical Practitioner and as a Teacher, he worked for their welfare. He moved with Blavatsky, Annie Besant and Col. Olcott of the Theosophical Society. He worked in the schools at Adayar and he had a good knowledge of the philosophy of Saiva Siddhanta and Vaishnavism. In 1902, he embraced Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Moreover, he wrote a treatise on Buddhism entitled, 'Buddharathu AdiVedam', explaining the principles and teachings of Buddha. He maintained that the social emancipation was possible only through the Buddhist Teachings. In fact, he solicited the help of Col. Olcott for converting the Paraiyas of Tamil Nadu to the Buddhist Faith. His plan somehow did not materialize. He tried to raise the self confidence of the Paraiyahs by telling them that they were originally Buddhists and they were later enslaved by their Hindu Conquerors. Through his Journal, Tamizhan, he ventilated the grievances of the Scheduled Castes and the Journal had circulation abroad also. He thus began the Neo-Buddhist Movement and became the forerunner of B.R. Ambedkar.²⁷

Iyothee Thass owned a Dispensary named Buddhist Medical Hall at Royapettah of Madras, where he used to give medical aid free of cost to the economically backward people without consideration of their caste or creed. Pandit Iyothee Thass was in search of a true religion. He wanted to spread Buddhism in Tamil Nadu, which was based on liberty, equality and fraternity. He wrote a treatise on Buddhism entitled, 'Buddharathu Vedam', explaining the principles of teaching of Buddha.

Iyothee Thass tried to raise the self-confidence among the Paraiyahs by telling them that they were originally Buddhists and later

enslaved by their Hindu conquerors. He was the editor of the Tamizhan till his death. The Maha Bodhi Society of India was responsible for the revival of Buddhism in South India. Pandit Iyothee Thass began his missionary work under the auspices of the South Indian Sakya Buddhist Association established by him at Madras. He was the first Depressed Class Leader who had worked for the cause of revivalism of Buddhism in India. He died at the age of 69 on 5th May 1914.²⁸ Iyothee Thass worked hard to start many schools in Chennai and provided free education and free meal to the students of the Subaltern Class.

Thoughts on Subaltern Issues

Iyothee Thass asserted that the Dravidians believed the Aryan's Caste System which did not develop education, agriculture and trade.²⁹ According to him, while Brahmins aimed only at knowledge, the king aimed only at proper rule, the traders aimed only at gains and labourers aimed at nothing.³⁰ Only the lower caste people involved themselves in agriculture in India.³¹ This concept of SWIKRITI – EQUAL BUT SEPARATE – did not promote the development of education, agriculture and trade. Hence he stressed that equality should be achieved through the abolition of Caste System. Scheduled Caste Teachers should be appointed to Scheduled Caste Schools.³² According to him, High Caste did not visit cheri due to the pollution-purity concept.³³ This concept cultivated a generation of enmity among them.³⁴

He maintained that in each Depressed Class Village, a school should be started and free land be given to the Low Caste.³⁵ He claimed that lazy people were called High Caste while persons with self-control were called Low Caste.³⁶ He lamented that in Tamil Country, Scheduled Caste were not allowed to express their views in the Village Court and judgments were delivered against them.³⁷

He lambasted the politicians who were cheating the poor and ignorant people by offering false promises³⁸. He maintained that the Vedas were common to all but Depressed Class were not permitted to read.³⁹ If God had created disparities in the matter of worship, it is better to be a good human being rather than worship God.⁴⁰

Since the language of the Muslims mingled with the language of the South, there is a necessity for the Tamils to have a separate Tamil Language.⁴¹ He said that the total letters of the Tamil Language could be reduced because it would enable one to read and write.⁴²

He demanded that the Government should appoint secular persons in the public postings because they would act fairly.⁴³ He wanted Caste System to be eradicated at first and only then freedom should be given to Indians.⁴⁴ He asserted that caste and religion are a real source of danger to the nation.⁴⁵ Caste-Hindus did not give burial ground to the Depressed Class but they demand Swaraj from the British.⁴⁶

According to Iyothee Thass, the development of Depressed Class depended upon the British Rule or Christian Missionary but not upon the reforms of Caste Hindus.⁴⁷ He openly blamed the Indian National Congress that they would not serve the cause of six crores of Scheduled Caste people.⁴⁸ He ridiculed the Indian National Congress that they would not bother about six crores of Scheduled Caste in India but would work for Negroes in South Africa which would be a waste.⁴⁹ Hence the Indian National Congress is not in any way useful for the cause of the poor Indians.⁵⁰

He wished that the British would give Swaraj after solution to the Hindu- Muslim problems because in the absence of British intervention it would be a great problem to the Indian Nation.⁵¹

He called the Prayer House of Scheduled Caste as Buddhist Temple, their Marriage Register Book as Buddhist Register, their burial place as Buddhist Burial Ground, their medical treatment as Buddhist Medical Hall.⁵² Further; he created a Study Centre for Depressed Class Students and called it Buddhist College and their Meeting Centre as the Buddhist Young Men Association.⁵³ He insisted that every year Scheduled Caste should celebrate Birth Anniversary Day of Buddha and they should create a charity institution called Buddhist Charity Fund.⁵⁴

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