

IYOTHEE THASS: A LEADER OF THE OPPRESSED

¹K.JEYARAJ & ²Dr. J. ALBARIS

¹Research Scholar in History, P.G. Research Department of History, Alagappa Government Arts College, Karaikudi

² Associate Professor of History, P.G. Research Department of History, Alagappa Government Arts College, Karaikudi

Abstract

Iyothee Thass was a Tamil pioneer of Dravidian Movement in South India. He was the initial documented anti-Brahmin head of the Madras Presidency. Iyothee Thass was also the first distinguished Dalit organizer to clinch Buddhism. He was a critic, communal reformer, Buddhist intellectual and Siddha surgeon. He was reputable the Advaidananda Sabha in A.D. 1876. He launches a periodical called, Dravida Pandian beside with Rev. John Rathinam in 1885. He issue a declaration in 1886, announces that the alleged untouchables be not Hindus. He conventional the Dravida Mahajana Sabha in 1891 and through the incredibly initial survey urges the so-called untouchables to inventory themselves as casteless Dravidians. This is fact makes Tamil Dalits the accurate children of the Anti-Brahmin inheritance which is today claimed by Non-Brahmin as Non-Dalits and etc.,

Keywords; Iyothee Thass, Movement, Buddhism, untouchables

INTRODUCTION

Iyothee Thass in the last decade of the 19th Century was a Writer, Journalist, and Social reformer, Siddha Physician, Tamil and Buddhist Scholar. He edited and published 'Tamizhan' a journal devoted to social reform for eight years. He opposed Brahminism Vedic rituals, untouchability. He championed communal representation, Women's Rights, self-respect, Rationalism etc., unfortunately the world of Tamil scholar purposely ignored contribution to Tamil Life and Thought Only AD suffered this ignoring. Subramania Bharathiyar, V.O.Chimdambaram Pillai, Singaravelach Chettiar, Pandit U.V. Saminatha Iyer, Thiru.V.Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, Pandithurai Thevar, Mahavidwan Raghava Iyengar who lived during the same period in the Madras Presidency were honored for their scholarship and devotion. Iyothee Thass many field contributions did not receive due recognition because he belonged to the Paraiyan caste. The neglect Iyothee Thass suffered was worse than physical violence. The higher-caste intellectuals in Tamil Nadu were adopting in practicing this variety of concealed violence. We are presenting before you the history of Tamil Nadu 100 years ago which was ignored by this castes intellectuals of Tamil Nadu. European merchants came to India in the latter half of the 17th century. They began as Traders but in course of time conquered and ruled large parts of the country including Madras State. During 1870's Englishmen came to India in large numbers to construct roads and bridges. Railway lines were laid and new departments like post and telegraph, police, military etc were created.

They lived in colonies and with their families they required the services of interpreters, gardeners, servants, cooks and watchmen. They also required grooms for their horses. Because the post required physical labour people belonging to the dominant castes did not offer their services. Englishmen ate beef

and that was an important reason why people from the dominant castes. Kept away from such services, the depressed classes of Tamilnadu the sons of the soil who were ignored by the caste ridden society were selected to do these jobs. The men who lived in the slums in and around Madras were selected to lay railway lines, run postal services and construct buildings. This resulted in the growth of big slums in Egmore, Chetput, Teynampet, Althottam etc. The depressed classes who lived in these slums organized associations like Panchamar Maha Jana Sabhas to forge unity among them and improve their living conditions. They demanded facilities for education for their children and employment for themselves. They also requested the Govt. to allot lands to the depressed classes for cultivation.

The British Government accepted their demands and either directly or through Christian Missionaries implemented them. On behalf of the DC's many journals were published in the Madras Presidency. When Sir Thomsa Munro was Governor of Madras Mr. George Harrington was led under him as the Head of the state Construction Department Thiru. Kandappan served under him. He was a Tamil Scholar and also Siddha Physician. He possessed a palm-leaf copy of the great Tamil work, TIRUKKURAL. He understood its importance as a classic of world literature and so he carefully preserved the copy. Kandappan's son Kandasamy who lived in the Thousand Lights area in Madras was also a Siddha Physician. His wife gave birth to a male child on 20.05.1845 and the child was named Kathavarayan. He was also initiated into the hereditary profession Siddha Medicine. Later he joined Iyothee Thass Pandit's Village School. He developed great respect for his teacher and adopted his name. English officials used to go to Nilgiris Hills during summer George Harrington took his Butler Kandappan and his family members with him to Ooty, Iyothee Thass married Dhanalakshmi sister of Rettamalai, Srinivasan who was his relation. Iyothee Thass started Advaita Philosophy during his stay at Ooty and formed the Advaitanandha Sabha to propagate Advaita Philosophy Col. H.S. Olcott, President of the International Theosophical society had started 5 free schools for Panchama children in the centre of Madras. He also became acquainted with Rev. John Rathinam who started a school for the oppressed in Madras. He formed Dravidar Kazhagam in 1882 and started the journal 'Dravida Pandian' in 1885. Iyothee Thass friendship with the two persons mentioned above introduced for reaching changes in his thinking. Dr. T. Dharmarajan St. Xavier's College, Palayamkottai when the Mahajana Sabha (Madras) conducted its General Body Meeting. Iyothee Thass moved a resolution containing some demands. The opposition to his demands opened his eyes. Did he make revolutionary demands? No, he requested that Pariahs may be allowed entry into Siva and Vishnu Temples. He also sought facilities for educating pariah children. These were ordinary demands but 100 years ago they met with stiff opposition. Entrenched casteism opposed his very ordinary demands. "You may call yourself a HINDU. But Siva and Vishnu are not your deities. Karuppasamy and Sudalamadan are your deities. Be satisfied with worshipping them" said caste Hindus. It was a defining moment in his life.

POLITICAL ACTIVITY OF IYOTHEE THASS

The Indian state has little to recognize Iyothee Thass, a stalwart and revolutionary of the Dalit community apart from the elaborate eye-wash activity of having a stamp released in his honour in September 2005. Born on May 20, 1845 to Kandasamy in Coimbatore district, his real name was

Kathavarayan and he adopted the name of his teacher Iyothee Thass. He grew up in the Nilgiris and later settled in Madras. He was a native physician of repute in Siddha medicine. It is learnt that one of his grandfathers was a butler of Lord Arlington. Aloysius further points out that even before he turned to Buddhism, Iyothee Thass was 'established as a recognized leader of people in northern Tamilakam.' His activist history is luminous: As a young man of twenty-five, he had organized the Depressed Classes into 'Advaidananda Sabha, whose objective appears to have been twofold: one, opposition to the proselytizing activities of the Christian missionaries; two, to explore the emancipatory potentials of the Advaitic tradition in undermining varna/caste discriminations.' His flirtation with Hinduism (or its advanced tenets) seems to have ended with his youth. His involvement with the problems and the situation of the Depressed Classes led him to validate their original identity and refute the imposed identity of Hinduism. The importance he accorded to this can be understood in the light of the following incidents: "in 1881, he sought to intervene in the census process and demanded that the aboriginal and 'outcaste' communities be recorded as 'original Tamils' and this was followed by a declaration in 1886 that the original inhabitants of this area were not Hindus." Ravikumar aptly identifies that Iyothee Thass's urging 'the so-called untouchables to register themselves as casteless Dravidians' in the very first census 'makes Tamil Dalits the true descendents of the anti-Brahmin legacy'. The Dravidar Kazhagam was founded by Rev. John Ratnam of the Wesleyan mission as early as 1886. Iyothee Thass was associated with him in bringing out a newsmagazine called the Dravida Pandian.

The Dravida Mahajana Sabha was formed in 1891 under the leadership of Iyothee Thass in Ooty in the Madras Presidency. On the conclusion of the first state level Conference on 1 December 1891, he sent a copy of the resolutions to the Congress Party. Here merely received an acknowledgement, but no subsequent action was taken. Piqued by this, he remarked that the Indian National Congress was only a Bengali Brahmin Congress. His hostility towards the Congress made him anticipate and predict the self-fulfilling prophecy that "just like the caste system split to form the 1008 graded castes, the Congress would also split." Apart from maintaining a highly activist lifestyle by leading the Dalit people, he also started the Tamilan magazine in June 1907 and ran the weekly continuously till his death in 1914.

OPPRESSED CLASSES

In the Indian context, the 'Scheduled Castes' of today are the 'Depressed Classes' of yester years. The term 'Depressed Classes' began to be used in official circle in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. These Depressed Classes shared certain common features of discrimination, degradation and exploitation due to contemptuous treatment they suffered at the hands of caste-Hindus for over long years. 'Untouchability' and 'segregation' were the two essential attributes of this class people. According to B.R. Ambedkar, by the fourth century A.D., the untouchability, an abominable social stigma got institutionalized and the 'hatred people' were treated as belonging to 'fifth varna'. The expression of 'Depressed Classes' is made up of two words 'Depressed' and 'Classes'. The former is the adjective form of verb 'Depressed' which means to press down and later is the plural of classes which connotes "One wide group of people who have

common way of life and have political or economic similarity and equal social status and similar interests.” Thus in the ordinary parlance the Depressed Classes should mean a group of people pressed down. The untouchables were called Depressed Classes. The term Depressed Classes is used to describe the lowest in the Hindu caste system, which were suppressed by the caste-Hindus through the ages. Romans had their slaves, Spartans their helots, British their villainets, Americans their Negroes, Germans their Jews and Indians their depressed people who were considered as low classes they were considered below the Sudras who formed the lowest social order in varna system. In the Puranas they were called, aaprusyas, avarnas, chandalas. Svapachas, antyajas, jabawans, varishals, antyawasi, antya and bhang.

JOURNALS OF DEPRESSED CLASSES

During this critical period, a dozen of Tamil journals were published by the Depressed Class intellectuals in Tamil Nadu. The most notable among these journals are Suriyodayam (Sun Rise) (1869), Panchama (The Outcaste) (1871), Sugirdavasani (1877), Dravidapandian (later Dravidan) (1885) Dravidamitran (1885), Anror Mitran (1886), Mahavikatatoothan (1888), Paraiyan (1893), Illara Ozhukkam (1898), Puloga Vyanan (1900), Dravida Kokilam (1907) and Tamilan (1907) and Tamil Pen (Tamil Woman). In the columns of these journals, Dalits intellectuals like C.Iyothee Thass, A.P.Periyasamy Pulavar, T.C.Narayanaswamy Pillai, T.I.Swamikannu Pulavar, Pandit Munisamy, Rettamalai Srinivasan, John Rathinam, Muthuvira Pavalar, K.Swappaneswari Ammal and several others vehemently criticized casteism, brahmanism, manudharma, Kalpa Sutra, etc., They also too up their cudgel of attacks against social evils that were rampant in the Hindu Society. They stood for the liberation of the women and Depressed Classes from the tradition bound Hindu Society.

BRITISH RULE- AN AGE OF EQUALITY

The British repressive legal measures did not much affect the Depressed Classes. The Depressed Class Leaders considered the necessity of the British Rule for liberation of their people in all spheres. The British Rule heralded an 'Age of Equality', because the people who were oppressed for centuries due to the practice of untouchability and the rigid caste system began to feel the breath of freedom. Hence, due to the historical necessity, the activities of Depressed Class intellectuals were mostly pro-British. Even B.R. Ambedkar was considered as "the most pro-British Indian". A seven-member Dalit jury editing a supplement for The Pioneer on The Dalit Millennium ranked the arrival of Vasco Da Gama as the turning point in Indian history, for it was his discovery of the sea route that activated the arrival of the ideas of democracy, equality, rule of law. A new vision and a new worldview emerged which was against the established society. The western education was denied to the Depressed Class people. It was because of religious sanction. But the availability of the print medium helped in awakening the Depressed Classes. The Tamizhan weekly of Pandit C. Iyothee Thass was used as an instrument to protest against caste discrimination, propagate Buddhist ideology and to reclaim the original identity of the Depressed Classes.

ADVAINDANANDA SABHA

Born on May 20, 1845 to Kandasamy in Coimbatore district, C.Iyothee Thass's surname was Kathavarayan and he adopted the name of his teacher Iyothee Thass. He grew up in the Nilgiris and later settled in Madras. He was a native physician of repute in Siddha medicine. It is known that one of his grandfathers was a butler of Lord Arlington. He became a popular leader of people in Northern Tamil Nadu. At the age of twenty-five, he established 'Advaidananda Sabha'. The objectives of the Sabha were two fold. One was the prevention of the proselytizing activities of the Christian missionaries. The second was to find out the emancipatory potentials of the Advaitic tradition in undermining varna/caste discriminations. His link with Hinduism was ended with his youth age. His involvement with the problems and the situation of the Depressed Classes led him to refute the imposed identity of Hinduism. In 1881, he sought to intervene in the census process and demanded that the aboriginal and 'outcaste' communities be recorded as 'original Tamils' and this was followed by a declaration in 1886 that the original inhabitants of this area were not Hindus. He urged 'the so-called untouchables to register themselves as casteless Dravidians in the very first census makes Tamil Dalits the true descendents of the anti-Brahmin legacy. The Dravidar Kazhagam was founded by Rev. John Ratnam of the Wesleyan Mission as early as 1886. Iyothee Thass was associated with him in bringing out a newsmagazine called the Dravida Pandian.

DRAVIDA MAHAJANA SABHA :(1891)

The Dravida Mahajana Sabha was formed in 1891 under the leadership of Iyothee Thass at Ooty on 1st December 1891. Ten resolutions were passed demanding civic rights, educational concessions, removal of certain objectionable rules in jail manual, economic advancement of the Depressed Classes, due share in appointment in government services including that of village offices. On the conclusion of the first state level Conference, he sent a copy of the resolutions to the Congress Party. Here merely received an acknowledgement, but no subsequent action was taken. Annoyed by this, he remarked that the Indian National Congress was only a Bengali Brahmin Congress. His hostility towards the Congress made him anticipate and predict the self fulfilling prophecy that "just like the caste system split to form the 1008 graded castes, the Congress would also split." He became a highly Dalit activist and led the people to the path of progress. He started the Oru Paisa Tamilan magazine in June 1907 and was renamed Tamilan on 26 August 1908 and it ran as weekly continuously till his death in 1914.

ANTI-ARYAN DISCOURSE

Iyothee Thass was much connected with the anti-Aryan discourse of the Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu; His discourse was recognized by a host of scholars. Bergunder viewed that Iyothee Thass belonged to a Paraiyar elite which in the early years of the Raj and achieved a certain degree of social advancement in different ways, be it as soldiers, as employees in medical services, as house-servants to Europeans, as employees in Christian missions, as mine workers etc. The increasing brahmanization of colonial society at the end of the Nineteenth Century began to restrict such opportunities for social advancement and thereby

counteracted the interests of this small Paraiyar middle class. Amidst tumultuous situation where the Paraiyar Society faced its greatest threats from caste-Hindu forces in culturally degrading Paraiyars, the Tamil Buddhist movement of Iyothee Thass came to flourish, and his magazine *Tamilan* grew from strength to strength. In fact, ethnic identities tended to attain their greatest importance in situations of flux, change, resource competition and threats against boundaries. Ericksen views that consequently that political movements based on cultural identity are strong in societies undergoing modernization, although this does not account for the fact that these movements become nationalist movements. He adds, "Ethnic symbolism referring to the ancient language, religion, kinship system or way of life is crucial for the maintenance of ethnic identity through periods of change. Generally speaking, social identity becomes most important the moment it seems threatened. The British Power imparted education and literacy to the Paraiyars. Practicing suffocating forms of untouchability, the caste-Hindus, especially the Brahmins thoroughly denied education to the Dalits. People followed the professions of their forefathers, and the only known system of schooling that was opened only to the Brahmins was the Gurukula System. However, the coming of the British brought with it a host of educational institutions, mostly schools. Being from another country, and lacking a caste consciousness, their program of imparting an English education empowered the oppressed. As Eriksen

Views, "Standardized mass education can therefore be an extremely powerful machine for the creation of abstract identifications. Literacy enables people to create 'authorized' versions of their history, and in view of the 'objective' status granted written accounts of history in most literate societies, the manipulation, selection or reinterpretation of history for political or other purposes becomes an important activity in the creation and re-creation of ethnic allegiances". "The form of cultural reflexivity engendered by literacy may be a decisive variable in the ethnic revitalization of indigenous peoples. Since 'culture as a thing' is important in ethno-political symbolism, and since it can most effectively be turned into a thing through writing, we can assume that minorities confronted with capitalism and the state stand a better chance of surviving as culture-bearing groups than illiterate groups. Groups which have 'discovered that they have a Culture', who have invented and reified their culture, can draw on myths of origin and a wide array of potential boundary-markers that are unavailable to illiterate minorities."

CULTURAL RENAISSANCE OF DEPRESSED CLASSES

Literacy paved the way for a cultural renaissance among the Paraiyars (Depressed Classes). They organized them like the Paraiyar Maha.jana Sabha and the Adi- Dravida Mahajana Sabha and in a host of activist magazines that were published. Like the early nineteenth century saying of Bishop Wilson, "The number of those who needed to be awakened was far greater than that of those who needed comfort." They accorded importance to the publication of journals and pamphlets (propaganda), seeking Clauses 18 and 19 of the Rules and Regulations of the All India Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha. The clause 18 states that all donations and subscriptions received by the Sabha shall vest in the Executive Committee. The Clause 19 views that the monies thus realized may be devoted to the following among other purposes: 1. to maintain

and subsidize journals 2. To publish books and pamphlet on political, social, scientific, economical and literary subjects. 3. To organize and hold public meetings. 4. to start and maintain libraries and free reading rooms.

Subsequently, great importance was given to expose their indigenous, aboriginal identity. As Worsley remarks, "Cultural traits are not absolutes or simply intellectual categories, but are invoked to provide identities which legitimize claims to rights". The creation of a larger and inclusive Tamil identity for the oppressed people, an identity towards castelessness is something that has happened on account of two reasons: one, their identity is perceived as being threatened, because Sanskritization and Aryan influence at the time was overwhelmingly powerful. The 'second reason' for the construction of identity was an attempt to create an organizational tool in a political struggle. The question of castelessness-a utopia formed out of the annihilation of castes -could be made possible only by the replacement of one identity (caste) with another (language). Caste and language are entirely dissimilar, because while caste is a system of graded hierarchies, language was egalitarian and anti-hierarchic. The structuring of such an identity was Made feasible through the weekly magazine sold at just a paise (one hundredth of a rupee), the Oru Paise Tamilan.

ORU PAISA THAMIZHAN :(1907-1914)

Iyothee Thass ideas and views were systematically argued out in a weekly that he launched in 1907. This weekly was called "Oru paise Thamizhan" (one paise tamilian) and its first issue was brought out on June 19, 1907. A year later the prefix 'one paise' was dropped at the request of the readers. After Pandithar's death, his son Pattabiraaman took charge of the Thamizhan weekly from November 17, 1914. Pandithar argues that the pariahs were, in fact, the original Tamils whose religion was Buddhism. Pariahs were degraded and their religion systematically destroyed when Aryan invaders from the North. The reason being that the Brahmins will seek to remember their historical enmity towards Buddhism and fear to make pariahs army commanders since the latter might plan revenge. To Pandithar, self government would be possible only when "brahmina cease to run away in fear on seeing a pariah and when pariahs cease to chase away brahmins and throw cow dung at them when the latter enter the pariah quarters in the village; and harmony prevails between the two and they come together as brothers and when the Buddha dhamma is realized.

Iyothee Thass was the driving force behind the establishment of several panchama schools in Chennai. Iyothee Thass grandfather kandhappan who gives his own manuscript of Thirukkural to Geroge Harrington for publishing. Iyothee Thass re-reading of history and literature is that they reflect a concern and anxiety over the semantic import of the term pariah. Pandithar own research had convinced him that the present-day pariahs were the original inhabitants of this land whose religion had been the compassionate rational and egalitarian creed of the Buddha. Iyothee Thass did not desire to see pariah co-opted into Hinduism that strongly opposed the social reform along national lines. He said, "Not content with characterizing us as pariahs, they proclaim that they are going to reform the depressed classes. When asked

who the depressed classes are, they the pariahs and Chandalas. The very first issue of Oru Paisa Tamilan (19 June 1907) begins with an invocation to God, the Government, Tamil, the nation, foreign countries and the English and Dravidian newspapers (including the Standard, Times, Hindu, Indian Patriot, Uberal, Swadesamitran, Vikatan, Nalindhiya, Andhra Prakasika, Poologa Vyasana and Tamil Madhu). In a beautiful couplet, he expresses the emotional and social importance that could be attached to the magazine: he who knows the worth of the Oru Paisa Tamilan will value it as one crore (10 million) gold coins. From 26 August 1908, it was published under the name, Tamilan. Apart from his preoccupation with the rediscovery of the original Tamil Buddhist identity, his other concerns are varied and included the problems of the Indians in South Africa, caste system among the Catholic Christians, the problems of agriculture in the Madras Presidency, appointment of magistrates and district collectors, the working of the Dravida Mahajana Sabha, the absence of representatives in the Legislative Assembly to redress the grievances of the poor and so on. He was also responsible for initiating a script reform in the Tamil language. For that he cited evidence from ancient inscriptions and palm-leaf manuscripts. He put his ideas to practical use by making use of the reformed script in his own newspaper.

WOMEN LIBERATION

His newspaper was also used to further the cause of women and to expose the sufferings they undergo in Hinduism. He blamed the system of child marriage, the disparity in the treatment meted out to men and women, the taboos of widowhood (like the compulsory tonsure of hair, white clothes, denial of a pillow to rest her head on), the problems faced by the married women, remarriage etc. In an essay, 'The desires of Indian men and the difficulties of women', Iyothee Thass wrote thus: "It is an ideology of present day Hindus that men can fulfill all their desires, but only women should undergo suffering." He further added thus: "while a man can marry 100 wives even when his wife is alive, a woman cannot remarry even when her husband is dead." In condemning the plight of women, he knocked out at the root of caste-Hindu patriarchy. The highest percentage of his censure is directed at the caste-Hindu newspapers.

CONCLUSION

The reflection of Iyothee Thass compass roughly sole attribute re interpretation. Those resources, re interprets the history, faith literature, convention, etc. In this circumstance his distinction in linguistics, literature, and supports of history he manufacture of a glorious dissertation called Tamil Buddhism. His proficiency in languages resembling Pali and Sanskrit other than Tamil bestows drastically fascinating remnants for this periodical.

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