

# Multilingualism and the Literary Cultures of India

*Edited and Introduced by*  
**M.T. Ansari**

The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodhana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From: Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.

Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi



**SAHITYA AKADEMI**

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**Introduction***M.T. Ansari*

Language, as everyone knows, is one of the central features of being human—even to the extent of becoming all too human!—but its Protean nature also ensures that the ‘real’ remains ever elusive. The infamous Lacanian maxim states that the unconscious is structured like a language, which in its inverse also implies that language is structured like the unconscious. Hence, attempts by various disciplines to understand the order of language, despite being dissimilar from that of the good-old grammarians, have mostly been descriptive and invariably inconclusive. And nowhere is this confusion, if not chaos, more evident than in the Indian context: “India’s language disorder, which began with the introduction of English as the language of education and administration in the nineteenth century, remains unresolved to this day” (Prasad, 2014: 93).

Contemporary Indian citizens can be classified as being mono-, bi-, multi-, pluri-, intra- and inter-lingual. But, most often, we seem to straddle the categories themselves, in a kind of multi-hyphenation, so much as to nullify any given classification scheme itself. This volume, however, is published in the context of an increasing global awareness of the demise of various language-cultures. It has been argued that, unlike Europe which once perceived multilingualism as a sin, even if not directly related to the Tower of Babel, in South Asia in general and in India in particular, difference and diversity “was not a sign of divine wrath, nor was multilinguality a crime that demanded punishment” (Pollock,

## From Discourse to Critique? Iyothee Thass and the Dalit Intellectual Legacy

*Dickens Leonard*

After a stellar career during the early twentieth century, Iyothee Thass was rediscovered recently—in the late 1990s—from the shadows that loomed large in the aftermath of the late twentieth century social movements. Thass' rediscovery was a result of pivotal Dalit movements across the country, much so particularly in the South, in the late 1990s. Aloysius' *Religion as an Emancipatory Identity* (1998), Geetha and Rajadurai's *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium* (1998), Pandian's *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin* (2007), and Ayyathurai's *Foundations of Anti-Caste Consciousness* (2011) in English as well as Gowthaman's *Ka. Iyothee Thassar Aaivugal* [K. Iyothee Thassar's Research] (2004), Dharmaraj's *Naan Poorva Bouddhan* [I'm an Ancient Buddhist] (2007), and Rajangam's *Vaazhum Bouddham* [Living Buddhism] (2016) in Tamil are particularly phenomenal in creating Thass as a discourse and critique.<sup>1</sup>

The late 1990s and the early 2000s, just like the earlier century during which Thass worked (1890s-1910s), were politically vibrant times. The Tamil intellectual sphere was churned and changed quite drastically by the 'little magazine' movements along with the Dalit socio-political emergence across the subcontinent.<sup>2</sup> This paper endeavours to consider this historical context and study the works that made these writers rediscover Thass. It wishes to track the

trajectory that produced Thass as an epistemological discourse. It captures the historical trajectory of studies on Thass and discusses how he is made part of an anti-caste discourse as a memory and as a part of Dalit intellectual legacy in the vernacular. This is possible because of the 1990s intellectual climate that looked-back in time, particularly in search of radical anti-caste figures who positively imagined and worked on the ideas of religion and community. Perhaps, this search in the 1990s has a global and a local reason. Firstly, in the context of '*Mandir*, Market, and *Mandal*' moments, there was indeed a search for alternative intellectual figures within the country. This gave rise to the importance of not only Babasaheb Ambedkar, but also Jyotirao Phule and Periyar E.V. Ramasamy as part of an anti-caste intellectual history.

Important academics have studied Dalit and anti-caste movements across the country. However, in the Tamil intellectual and political scenario, there was a serious search for figures who preceded the Dravidian movement. The increase of caste violence against Dalits post-1990s coupled with the intellectual and political vacuum that a global Dalit movement created on a post-Dravidian present, indeed, paved way to search for a pre-history. This rediscovery brought to light the true foundations of anti-caste in the Tamil public sphere. Thass was literally rediscovered through optimal research and work by steadfast intellectuals, activists, and academics. This also signifies the epistemological and ontological emptiness that Dalits felt by the end of the twentieth century after a fifty-year Dravidian regime.

What was Thass as a discourse in the works of Aloysius, Geetha and Rajadurai, Pandian, and Ayyathurai who wrote in English, and Dharmaraj and Gowthaman who wrote in Tamil? How did Thass' use of religion, particularly Tamil Buddhism, pave a viable anti-caste critique within the vernacular cosmopolitan? This paper, hence, suggests that at the level of epistemology, Dalits used writing and reading as acts towards an anti-caste community. Thass' and his contemporaries' efforts, hence, need a historical re-look when placed in the long nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Madras presidency.

In this context, Thass' important contribution to anti-caste thought and the Tamil Buddhist movement in the late nineteenth and twentieth century could be evaluated for a richer understanding of anti-caste history and religion. Social Scientists and writers have done so in the recent past and Thass has become a subject for scholarly interest as well as scorn. The discussion on Thass as a historical discourse and critique evaluates how scholars have treated him thus far for various reasons. This paper accounts these themes as Non-Brahmin discourse and the anti-caste critique.

### Thass for 'Non-Brahmin' Discourse

Geetha and Rajadurai wrote one of the first books on Non-Brahminism in Tamil Nadu and they argue that "Non-Brahminism is a historically evolved structure of feeling in the early twentieth century, where Brahmin subjectivity was mediated through well-marked rhetorical tropes and discursive concerns" (1998: xiv). The term Non-Brahmin, which reeves on hatred, is attributed to various trajectories of anti-caste movements beginning with the articulation of Dalit voices that emerged from the last decades of the nineteenth century. While they describe that the relationship between political non-Brahminism and the radical anti-caste politics was complex, they do not, however, find them fundamentally different or discontinuous. In such an approach, even the critical and creative use of religion for an anti-caste community consciousness by Thass is lost, if not given importance.

They refer to the Tamil Buddhist movement as one that concerns a group of "Buddhist Parayars" only (44). As it preceded the later Non-Brahmin movement, the authors treat the Tamil Buddhist movement as a precursor to the Dravidian ideology and that of transition. However, the movement itself was not given an autonomous anti-caste perspective. It is to be noted that the Tamil Buddhist movement had conceived of the Tamil civilization as integral rather than divisive, interactive rather than exclusionary, and inter-communicative rather than lofty and distant.

One could say that Geetha and Rajadurai misrepresent Thass as one who stands for syncretic Tamil centrism and Sanskrit

opposition. Besides, Thass never floated the Non-Brahmin conglomeration as an alternative emancipatory identity, which the authors state. They claimed that equality was proclaimed as an ideal by Non-Brahmins, as they came to demonstrate and realize their rights of access to places, events, and honours that were conventionally denied to them. It was under the name of culture that the authors took Thass also within the 'Non-Brahmin' political frame. He clearly opposed even this conglomeration 'Non-Brahmin'. He discouraged any form of fundamental negativity as a form of ethical life. Dubbing both the Non-Brahmin and the *Adi-Dravida* protest as one and the same was just a strategy to challenge the supremacy of Brahmin power. It does not necessarily become anti-caste, or challenge caste-power as such, when the face of the Brahmin challenge changed.

While Thass' critique of *Swadeshi* reform and *Swaraj* movement was against the conduct of the Brahmin proponents of caste through nationalism, Geetha and Rajadurai only highlight the civic fights, and not his work on Tamil Buddhism. They suggest that his plea for a political ideal that embraced social reform and democratic political activity, and his criticism of the *Swadeshis* seem to underwrite the political philosophy of the Non-Brahmins (66). In a vague attempt, they club all critiques on *Swadeshi* nationalists as constituting a Non-Brahmin conglomerate. Thass was never given his own autonomy and historical importance. His attempts were just clubbed as one which appreciated the work of British in India. They were treated as *Adi-Dravida* narrative that awaited a Non-Brahmin millennium to become a social movement.

Secondly, the authors narrate that the socially oppressed *Adi-Dravidas* in the pages of *Tamizhan*—the journal that Thass ran—evinced faith and good will on the British rulers. Particularly, the entry into army, and the fashioning of a martial self in the emperor's uniform—the authors claim that these changes increased the self-perception of the socially oppressed (Geetha and Rajadurai, 1998: 69). However, they do not recognize the multiple means through which the oppressed engaged with the British and it reflects apathy over not making the oppressed speak for themselves.

Instead, an underlying accusation seems to mask the logic and that is—the *Adi-Dravidas*, indeed, showed good faith on the British rule, and this signified the ideology of ‘being ruled’. The *Adi-Dravida*’s faith towards the British presence in India is counterposed to be the main element behind the unity of the Non-Brahmin.

In many ways, Non-Brahmin, as an anomaly, misrecognizes the anti-caste movement led by the most oppressed. If the Non-Brahmin millennium had been an anti-caste millennium, the supposed possibilities of post-caste interaction and bonding at the social level would have emerged in the contemporary. Even though “there emerged new modes of perception, new structures of feeling, and new imaginings of the self” (Geetha and Rajadurai, 1998: 86), the deliberate failure to recognize the survival of caste amongst the Non-Brahmins in this period is a problem that the authors neither reflect nor record. And the Non-Brahmin conglomerate’s attitude towards caste as social oppression is problematic when they do not recognize the autonomous possibilities of the anti-caste framework propelled by the most oppressed for a post-caste future. In the words of Dravidian ‘Non-Brahmin’ intellectuals, Thass indeed had to wait for Periyar.<sup>3</sup>

The authors falsely treat these critiques of caste, which precede the Dravidian movement, as contesting only the pre-eminence of the Sanskrit language. This is not true in the case of Thass as he had treated Pali, Sanskrit, and Tamil as languages through which the Buddhist thought was spread across the continent. Hence, the work of Thass particularly is not linked with the Aryanist theory, rather he inverts it. The authors treated him as an amateur philologist, examining words, splitting them up, identifying their roots and reconstructing their meaning, as he desired to recover the past in its own moment (104). This would make him a maverick and an eccentric at work, and his writing a historiographical adventure. This act of Thass—why would he do what he does—was never treated as a serious subject of enquiry.

They also construe that the work by the protestant missionaries from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries such as Ziegenbalg, Rhenius, and Bernard Schmidt made Tamil a popular language of

Christianity. This, they state, indeed produced an inevitable “anti-Aryanism and anti-Sanskritism” (104). They argue that this seems to be the background which makes Thass not to read the past as a history of victimhood and oppression. Therefore, Thass’ foray into history transcends the ground of historiography which reclaims a hermeneutical trajectory governed by the laws of the imaginative rather than that of empirical enquiry. His entire intellectual work is dependent upon the European interface, they suggest.

Hence, though Thass and other anti-caste intellectuals searched for an authentic past, they just facilitated the emergence of Tamil classicism, a concern with origins, and of Tamil literati whose traditional learning was now subverted to serve the anxieties of the present. Thass, hence, was called as ‘an antiquarian ideologue’ (an accusation that Pandian also made). This created the ideological conditions that made the *Adi-Dravida* emergence serve a political Non-Brahminism with a purposive edge (Geetha and Rajadurai, 1998: 104).

One of the primary reasons for Geetha and Rajadurai to conceptualize the Non-Brahmin millennium was their foremost passion to unravel the legacy of Non-Brahminism by examining the political and social comradeship between caste Hindus and Dalits which they claim that the movement enabled (501). This was one of the primary problems. The various ways through which the most oppressed responded to the continuing violence against Dalits, and a retrograde male chauvinism that sought to police women’s lives and public morality, were never factored in as critical and pertinent problems to review the movement. Nor the history of the ‘*Adi-Dravida* assertion’, as they claim, was treated on par with an anti-caste radicalism which largely altered the world view of Subaltern movements that used religious and linguistic sources against caste. Their only account was to equate and bring together the genealogy of anti-caste as “Dravidian in content and specific in Tamil” (504). Hence, they reject the Dalit critique on the Dravidian movement’s claim to political and social power, which seriously discounts the importance of anti-caste Tamil radicalism of the Self-Respect movement.

In fact, Irschick informs that, as early as 1917, the Justice party's political proposals for a unified Non-Brahmin mobilization were rejected by none other than the major Dalit political leader Rettaimalai Sreenivasan who founded the *Parayar Mahajana Sabha*. He reportedly rejected them because this would bring a caste Hindu Raj which would mean ruin for the Dalits (Irschick, 1969: 71-72). Hence, scholars critically evaluated the Non-Brahmin movement of 1910s and 1920s in Madras with respect to its inclusiveness and anti-casteism. Historians have skeptically pointed out that the elite social groups from which Non-Brahminism arose were no better suited than their Brahmin rivals to bring about any real democratization of politics in South India (Irschick, 1969; Baker and Washbrook 1975; Washbrook 1977). While these studies are critical in their evaluation of the Non-Brahmin movement, even Geetha and Rajadurai's book-title denotes the simultaneous assimilation of Dalit anti-caste sentiment into an elite Non-Brahmin movement. The sub-title *From Iyothee Thass to Periyar* refers to Thass as a Dalit leader who preceded the Non-Brahmin movement who, however, never used or accepted the term (Dharmaraj, 2008).

This is also very true of Pandian's seminal work *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin* (2007), where he studies Thass along with Maraimalai Adigal (1876-1950) to conceptualize how the new voice of the 'Non-Brahmin' speak of the other and make their own self (102-143). Pandian acknowledges that a network of associational life in the Madras presidency during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries was run by the oppressed to air their views and grievances by setting up publishing tracts and organizations. However, just like Geetha and Rajadurai, he also understands them as being talkative only about the Brahmin. This is not necessarily a talking—in their own voice—about a community of freedom as “untouchables, Sudras, neo-Buddhists, Saivaites, and rationalists” (Pandian, 2007: 102). He observes that Thass had to talk about the Brahmin, to speak of one's emancipatory self. This is an inadequate reading as it does not account, if not deny, the role of oppressed communities' fight against caste in history.

Apart from calling Iyothee Thass as an untouchable “Parayar intellectual”, a term which Thass out rightly rejected, Pandian, just like Geetha and Rajadurai, also termed Thass as an exemplar old-world intellectual in the Tamil region. Textualism and religious debate were the only modes of cultural intervention, he claimed, that Thass practiced. Hence, his critiques of the Brahmin were primarily in the domain of culture, Pandian clarified. Thass had started an *Advaidananda Sabha* (1870), followed by the *Dravida Mahajana Sabha* (1891) in Nilgiris, and much as a grass root organization the *Sakya Buddhist Sangam* (1898) in Madras and the North-Western region of the presidency. However, Pandian had failed to recognize and acknowledge the organic nature of the political work that anti-caste intellectuals like Thass were doing against dominant caste culture, through their works in writing and action, particularly against the caste-Hindu reactions.<sup>4</sup>

While Thass treats writing history as a pedagogic act, Pandian declares that Thass' history is nothing but an ethnographic curiosity that is based on self-knowledge. An enquiry, he states, that is fundamentally based on the history of the animosity between the Parayars and Brahmins. However, he also considers that in the absence of any historiographic details, the claims of Thass are revelatory and mythical. However, messianic claim through religion has been a universal claim for emancipation and resistance of the oppressed across the world (Lanternari, 1964). In fact, Thass' exegetic journey through numerous Tamil texts such as *Thirukkural*, *Silappadhikaram*, *Manimekalai*, *Tholkaapiyam*, and *Nannool* yielded him further evidence of Buddhist presence in the Tamil country. This was through a persistent intellectual labour, ingenious and idiosyncratic interpretation of etymology, and remarkable flights of imagination.

Pandian, however, evaluates Thass as emphasizing individual moral conduct, and confines him to the limited realm of religio-cultural practices, “directing only the Buddhist Parayars”. Thus, he charged that Thass' proposed measures avoided confronting the question of uneven power between castes. Much more, he understands Thass only as borrowing Buddhism from Brahminical-

Hinduism (117-118). Thass instructing cleanliness to the Buddhist masses suddenly became an accusation about imitating the Brahmin. He interprets that Thass “idealized existing Brahminical practices and inferiorized Parayar practices such as fire-walking and animal sacrifices” (118). Thereby, he brands him as “practicing attunement” (Connolly, 1996: 17)—a strategy by which members of a community become closely oriented to a higher direction in being and to the more harmonious life it renders possible.

Pandian argues that this initiates nothing but a variety of self-hate and only by attuning their current religious practices to a ‘higher’ ritual ideal could the oppressed—Dalits—become Buddhist. This, he states, is a boringly pedagogic project that causes estrangement and creates a painful artifice of normalization. This argument is legitimized by the limited followers of Thass’ Tamil Buddhism. Importantly, the exegetic strategy of producing commentaries on literary texts and recovering for Buddhism, as practiced by Thass, made him an elitist who constituted just an exclusivist public. This literary public, Pandian states, excluded the Tamil Subalterns, as it demanded specific forms of literary competence and interpretive skills (118-119). This accusation is strikingly like the Marxist critique of Ambedkar and Ambedkarites, which treats the movement against caste for self-respect as bourgeois and nationalist.<sup>5</sup>

While Thass fashioned and laboured as an organic intellectual, Pandian relegates him to the likes of “a Parayar politician” who was constrained and limited by the religio-cultural space. Pandian even states that as Thass’ movement did not emerge in the popular, his followers later had to ‘secularize’ themselves and ‘mobilize as Parayars’ to contest the Brahmins in the domain of the political. Hence, they become foot soldiers of the Dravidian movement under the leadership of Periyar Ramasamy. Pandian understands that mobilization had to be a broad coalition of Non-Brahmins of varied identities against Brahminical dominance and hegemony.

In an ingenious way thus, Pandian equates Thass’ movement with that of Maraimalai Adigal’s (1876-1950) Saivaite Dravidianism, but differentiates it largely from Periyar E.V. Ramasamy’s

(1879-1973) Self Respect movement, which propagated a rationalist critique couched in everyday Tamil.<sup>6</sup> Periyar, according to Pandian, could mobilize varied identities that came under the Non-Brahmin coalition. Pandian reasons that Periyar’s critique of Brahmins and Hindu religious practices that inferiorized “lower castes, women, physical labour, and non-sanskritic languages” (120) was a rallying point under which such a bottom of the caste-hierarchy coalition could be made.

On many levels, such a reading dismisses, if not misleads, an anti-caste intellectual to speak for himself. Thass readily engaged with the social world of his times. His approach to common people’s politics and his activism were organic in many ways. Neither did he dwell in a world of splendour nor did he move away from everyday politics. Oppressed subaltern intellectuals have always reinterpreted an anti-caste religion of their own, while contesting the dominant past that locates them as untouchables. Pandian seemed to have not recognized this aspect of the anti-caste movement. A Dalit critique of the Dravidian movement generates from the position of social experience and emancipatory vision. Obliterating such a view is a serious failure to understand a resistant critique that emanates from an embodied Dalit occupying an anti-caste position. Instead, Pandian reads the embodied critique of caste from the most oppressed, in their historical attempts, as enunciating a “politics of attunement” that never concerns wider political publics. This is an act of denial to those for whom it matters. It is indeed a violent denial. Moreover, translating the Subaltern attempts towards assertive emancipatory thought as valorising caste is nothing but necessarily refusing to look beyond the world of the dominant—here the discourse on Brahmin as the central figure.

Thass did not just negatively abuse dominant religion, but he founded a ‘counter-throw’ by re-imagining an emancipatory religion that rationalizes sociality against caste immunitas. He produced a creative textuality that contests caste oppression instituted through a religion. This counter-throw on history, by Thass, is pedagogic because change is the ultimate desire. Texts that have insisted to



place a rationalized community over-written on the idea of a united 'Non-Brahmin' cluster, against the guile of the historical Brahmin, do not qualitatively refer and acknowledge the practice of caste in obliterating their own pre-histories. One is neither ethical nor moral when one does not engage with religions that contest caste. The Dalit engagement with religion then is fundamentally about a textuality of ethics to foreground a political community.

For instance, Dharmaraj's "Rebel's Genealogy" (2008), in this context, criticizes Pandian's formulations on the Brahmin and the Non-Brahmin. He accounts that Pandian's theoretical concepts lack particular use for the Tamil society as he only writes to the English academia. Especially his use of the term 'Non-Brahmin' is central only to the English scholarship from the twentieth century, and not particularly to the Tamil public sphere. The concept, Dharmaraj argues, only appears in English and may wrongly determine the politics of the entire Tamil people, especially the most oppressed. Importantly, he finds that there is no unity that is valid behind the term 'Non-Brahmin'.

To bring the question of hereditary land power not only in cultural and social, but also in political and economic terms, Rupa Viswanath clearly states that the division between elite Non-Brahmin castes and Brahmins bears no comparison to that between landed castes and hereditarily unfree oppressed communities. She pitches that it was the depressed classes who most often conceptualised a critique of caste in terms of the relation between landed elements and landless Dalit labourers (Viswanath, 2014: 247-248). Hence, Pandian's simplistic understanding of colonialism as the sole cause for the emergence of Brahmin figure, his inadequate perspective on Iyothee Thass and oppressed communities' engagement with colonialism, and finally the depiction of the Dravidian politics as 'subaltern' are problematic.<sup>7</sup> Dharmaraj underlines that the discourses on colonialism and Orientalism continue to uphold the Brahmin on the one hand, but deny the role of oppressed communities' fight against caste in the history of Tamil Nadu.

Pandian, hence, did not allow an anti-caste intellectual to speak for himself. He read Thass in isolation with Adigal, rather than

comparing the social world and the context that produced their texts. Thass readily engaged with the social world of his times. His approach to common people's politics and his activism were organic in many ways. He did not dwell in a world of splendour nor did he move away from everyday politics. Oppressed Subaltern intellectuals have always reinterpreted an anti-caste religion of their own, while contesting the dominant past that locates them as untouchables. On the one hand, Pandian valorises the 'Non-Brahmin' as a political binary to the Brahmin in a discourse situated in colonialism; while on the other, it is intellectually and politically defective when he rejects the unilateral voice of Thass by assimilating him with Adigal's caste-centric sectarian Saivism that was in opposition to anything egalitarian and social.

Geetha, Rajadurai, and Pandian, in other words, fail to recognize that concrete experience can become a necessary epistemic resource for the progression of concepts, "not as a mere journey of concepts that refer to other concepts alone" (Guru and Sarukkai, 2012: 121)—here Non-Brahmin as a concept. This is thus a failure to read the moral and political force of the categories of resistance with a unified meaning. Buddhism had a hermeneutic and political power to interrogate Brahminism according to Thass, but perhaps, 'Non-Brahmin' intellectuals had a different take on the experiential hermeneutic as a counter to caste.

For Thass, critiquing caste and creating an anti-caste community imaginary was not just to portray the Brahmin as a figure of scorn with an appropriated ideal status. It was a subversive attempt to create a textuality that refutes and creates a religion and culture against caste. Pandian interpreted that the metaphysics of caste as an enforced hierarchy largely remained intact in Thass; his discourses only underscored the continuing power of the Brahmin in the Tamil context. This reading is more than vindictive. Pandian refused to acknowledge that not just 'Non-Brahmin', but an anti-caste critique has a long historical significance, though a discontinuous one, and various Dalits were indeed its active participants.

However, anti-Brahminical views have been prevalent in South India and Ceylon since the middle of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, what is usually noticed is the Non-Brahmin upper

caste positions against the Brahmins, and never the marginalized communities' anti-caste practices that took both the Brahmins and Non-Brahmin upper castes to task. This shields the actors of the Non-Brahmin movement, the Dravidian movement and the Self-Respect movement as caste-less, whereas the Dalits who had led anti-caste mobilizations are brushed with significations of caste. Tamil Dalit intellectuals, particularly, find fault with the self-presentation of the Non-Brahmin movement's 'common sense' as radical. They criticize it as being produced, reinforced, and threateningly indoctrinated by a section of English-speaking Dravidian intellectuals (Ravikumar and Azhagarasan, 2012: xxv).<sup>8</sup> This is indeed a serious critique on the foundations of history in India that contribute to erase anti-caste public memory. Particularly, the role of academics and history-writing in India calls for a critical anti-caste perspective.

### **Thass for Anti-Caste Critique**

Although Aloysius, Dharmaraj, Gowthaman, and Ayyathurai address the same issue and use Thass as a point of reference, yet they differ largely from earlier writers. They study Thass' works by giving importance to the ideas of communitary experience and experiential community. This part, as a critical counter to the Non-Brahmin discourse, designates how scholars have insisted on the anti-caste critique in Thass by foregrounding religion, culture, thought, and consciousness.

#### ***a. Foregrounding Religion***

Aloysius treats the movement as an emergence of the hitherto religiously excluded. Hence, the religion of the oppressed is "an ethically ideal world-view" as it embodies an egalitarian social order. Secondly, this religion comes as "an option"—a choice, and never a given. People move away, consciously rejecting the ascriptive religion. And thirdly, there is an "emphasis on sociality and collectivity". Celebration becomes central to the religion of the oppressed. It creates "an alternative hegemony" in the cultural and

symbolic realm. And lastly, religion becomes an "emancipatory identity" when the new religion is transformed into an identity of the given collectivity as it expresses unity and continuity (Aloysius, 1998: 14-20).

Structuring the movement as one of cultural resistance, Aloysius studies religion as a space where the oppressed Subaltern communities—the lower sections—hark back to their tradition of revolt. Religious movements such as the Tamil Buddhist movement, he argues, seek to redefine, improve upon, consolidate, and legitimize the life-situation of conflicting groups and classes. From conditions of "liminality" to the experience of "relative deprivation", these movements are termed as having a religio-spiritual dimension that go against "ascriptive hierarchy"—to emancipate oneself from the prison house of religio-cultural slavery (Aloysius, 1998: 17).

He foregrounds that the Subaltern life-world and their social protests in the nineteenth century were religiously expressed. He finds a pattern in their resistance where religion is often constructed from outside Hinduism—from "an earlier non/anti-Brahminical traditions" of the subcontinent. Secondly, there is also a selective refashioning of several sects of Hindu religion. And lastly, there is an appropriation of religious traditions of a non-Indian origin. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries gave a larger field across the sub-continent where 'oppressed castes' subjectively constructed "sacred canopies" within a limited context.<sup>9</sup> However, they were experientially located, though they expressed through a textual cosmology in print. This aspect of the Subaltern emergence is hardly studied in the Indian context. He argues that the nation failed to democratically emerge in India. The colonial elite just transferred the power to the nationalist Brahminical casteist elite. Thus, nationalism on the foundations of Hindu culture, with its caste practices intact, was promoted as unifying Hinduism and the post-colony in India.

Aloysius particularly studies Thass-led Tamil Buddhist movement as an emancipatory movement that articulated religion as its political and cultural content. This first study on Thass created a discourse on resistant religious practice, particularly, that

appeared for the first time in the weekly *Tamizhan*, which came out week after week from 1907 to 1914. The work of Buddhist *Sanghas* that worked in the Madras presidency, and those which were spread overseas, were also studied. Seemingly, as they independently claimed that the modern-day depressed classes were the Buddhists of yore, the Tamil Buddhist movement, Aloysius argues, claimed a discovery of a Tamil past as the community's collective identity. This Buddhist movement, he claims, actualized and symbolized the collective struggles of the oppressed people for social emancipation. Tamil Buddhism was expressed within language, literature, history, and religion in the early twentieth century and it was an expression of an emancipatory identity.

Three main points seem to emerge while understanding Aloysius' study of Thass and the Tamil Buddhist movement. Firstly, Aloysius identifies that there was a community present which was representative of a bigger mass of oppressed people. Secondly, they decided to recognize themselves as Buddhists. He argues that it was certainly an autonomous attempt to rediscover their lost identity as marginalized people. Thirdly, this group was led by a *Siddha* expert Pandit Iyothee Thass, a renowned scholar of Tamil language and literature, who was also well versed in Pali and Sanskrit. He was an organizational genius and a charismatic figure.

The Buddhist project aspired to construct an alternative hegemonic discourse as an interpretative continuity of the long pre-modern Tamil cultural heritage. The new religion was understood as a religion that directed the oppressed. But it was also open to the entire society. Besides, Aloysius claims that from 1907 to 1914, Thass produced rich interpretative research which was highly original. It contested and invented past while radically interpreting history. This paved way to understand historical research that emphasized religion as an embodied experience for the oppressed.

Aloysius, importantly, lays open how Tamil Buddhism became an antithetical religion of the oppressed. He suggests that Buddhism

explored and dwelled on the persistent and meaningful sphere of human symbolism that encompassed and expressed an emergent ethical consciousness. It retained a middle-path between religio-cultural and religious symbolism of the oppressed community. It was a new form of symbolism that expressed collective emancipation. In the struggle against the colonially empowered Brahminism, this project of emancipation was launched by the subalternized communities of Northern Tamil Nadu. This was an imagination for a new form of religion and cultural symbolism that expressed collective emancipatory life. This served as a new political meaning for religion as practice.

This inventory religion also came as a response to the fast-changing socio-political situation of the times. The earlier framework of religion and caste for the oppressed was particularly based on rejection, marginalization, dispossession, deprivation, suppression, and oppression. The dominant Brahminism executed them both in the sacred and secular spheres. Rejection, however, was countered by equal and opposite rejection of caste by the Tamil Subalterns. They recognized that caste is enslavement. The emancipatory strategies for a religion of the oppressed were opposite to those of the oppressors. Thus, Aloysius argues that castelessness became the new fundamental tenet of the new emancipatory religion. The value of this religion is marked by its rejection of caste principle. Calling for a casteless fraternity, it envisions a construction of an altogether new society, thereby addressing the existential concerns of the oppressed community.

Aloysius places Tamil Buddhism as a historical legacy from within. It used print media largely to construct a modern organization to reject caste primordiality. He identifies it as a well worked out and multifaceted ideology to interpret history against caste. He also recognized it as an ideological antecedent to Dravidian movement. It brought together a Tamil collective life, literature, culture, religion, and history into one compressed and integrated thesis, while giving a programmatic partnership and mass merger with other movements for emancipation.

### **b. Foregrounding Culture**

While Aloysius reads religion as an emancipatory category in the context of oppression and discrimination in India, Dharmaraj's important Tamil book *Naan Poorva Bouddhan* [I'm an Ancient Buddhist] (2007) brings forward a Dalit movement that openly asserted itself as Buddhist in the Tamil-context. Dharmaraj's text is more about the intellectual absent-mindedness of the Dalit-self in socio-cultural movements in Tamil Nadu. His book addresses why and how Thass, as an icon, was conveniently forgotten from the anti-caste intellectual climate of Tamil public sphere. Accounting Thass as a life to be studied, Dharmaraj presents him as a political radical—a life that was marked by a heroic passion for justice and self-respect. He presents interesting details of Thass' multifaceted life as a social revolutionary. His roles as a Buddhist reformer, a journalist, a public intellectual, a Tamil and *Siddha* scholar were seriously studied and presented. The Dalit intellectual collectives projected Thass as a re-discovered anti-caste intellectual of the Tamil country—a vernacular hero.

This very interesting narrative, in the long essay format and in simple Tamil, reads like a story and Dharmaraj depicts Thass as participating in a cultural revolution of his times. He presents him as an agent whose politics of culture preceded the claim for a change in governance. His movement is socio-cultural, which is neatly embedded and paralleled with the political emancipation of the people. It is, hence, at once social, cultural, and political emergence of the oppressed people. Dharmaraj also consents, along with Aloysius, that the struggle for Independence in India was a caste conspiracy. This, he argues, was exposed by many Dalit and 'lower' caste intellectuals, like Thass, in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Thass used it through Tamil Buddhism as a multi-layered informative response to caste and Brahminism. Religion was a field with an expansive imagination where Thass used interpretation as a mode of enquiry and expression.

This religious enquiry—a bulwark against caste and Brahminism—brought out the importance and use of historiographical resources such as oral narratives, literary

movements, Siddha medicine, Tamil linguistics, and hermeneutics. Dharmaraj negotiates with the construction of Buddhism as against caste—particularly its fight against Brahminism—by the Dalit intellectuals during the twentieth century. Dharmaraj portrays Thass and his writings as an effort to link the Tamil language and Buddhism. Accordingly, it was Thass who claimed that those who were oppressed and discriminated through caste—the Tamils who were treated badly than animals as untouchables—were Buddhists indeed. Hence his struggle was also to prove that Buddhism is a living—and hence not a dead—religion in India. It was indeed a counter-Tamil identity against and outside caste. In Tamil Buddhism, Thass found and interpreted a caste-less cosmology.<sup>10</sup>

Dharmaraj captures the reason for a century's forgetfulness of Thass in Tamil Nadu (83-94). He exposes the roots of Dravidian movement in the Tamil Buddhist movement and explains the links Periyar had with it. He accuses that the Tamil intellectual castes negated Thass. Asking the simple question why there is such Dalit anger and distrust on the Dravidian movement and describing how casteist Non-Brahmins had humiliated and discriminated the Dalits as untouchables, he exposes the dominant modes of the Dravidian movement with respect to caste. In many ways, Dharmaraj's Tamil writings also critically reads Aloysius' study of Thass by foregrounding the Dalit critique of the Non-Brahmin movement. Besides, Thass' enquiry was argued as one that was based on an expansive knowledge in Tamil—Grammar, Siddha medicine, Astrology, and Astronomy. He claims that it was Thass' research into the Tamil language that made him constitute Tamil Buddhism as a vibrant tool against caste.

Thass' interpretation of the literary history and cultural practices of Tamils from a Buddhist perspective gains importance for its non-Hindu and anti-discriminatory content. Along with Ravikumar, Dharmaraj claims that the anti-Brahminism of Thass keeps a distance from the Non-Brahmin movement as it predates Periyar. Much importantly, Thass' cultural critique was rooted within the history of Buddhism and Tamil. Hence, while Aloysius's work on Thass foregrounded religion as a category for emancipation

from oppression, Dharmaraj's study looked at culture and language as categories, where the foundation for emancipatory politics lay in asserting oneself as a holistic Buddhist. In both these attempts, caste as a category was countered by other emancipatory categories.

### c. *Foregrounding Thought*

Raj Gowthaman's *Iyotheethassar Aaivugal* [Iyothee Thass' Research] (2004) studies Thass' work primarily as intellectual history. Hermeneutics and interpretation are used as basis for intellectual thought and discourse to counter-read religion, language, and culture as a kind of politics against caste. This hermeneutics, as read by Gowthaman, places Thass within a resistant anti-caste Tamil intellectual tradition. Gowthaman historicises Thass as an intellectual who used the print public sphere quite efficiently. He historicises Thass in his times—placing him within the political climate, his contemporaries and Dalit intellectuals of his times—by studying his publishing activity along with the Buddhist revivalist work. His creative interpretations, Gowthaman specifies, have countered the dominant narratives of caste print spheres. The perspective of social imaginaries as histories, like that of *Indhirar Dhesa Sarithiram*, from the most oppressed is presented as a resistant historiography of a kind.

Thass practiced research that was an ethical and political activity. To Gowthaman, Thass was an extraordinary figure, who was extremely sophisticated at launching a knowledge-based resistance, by prioritizing the resources and experiences that he got as a Tamil Siddha practitioner. In fact, traditions competed to rediscover Buddhism especially in the twentieth century through Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900), Hermann Oldenberg (1854-1920), Monier-Williams (1819-1899), and Rhys Davis (1843-1922) from Europe; Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) from Srilanka; Rahul Sankrityayan (1893-1963) and D. Kosambi (1876-1947) from India.

Gowthaman places Thass within a Tamil public sphere which was making use of print as a medium to create a specific cultural lineage through the palm-leaf manuscripts. For instance, U.V.

Swaminatha Iyer (1855-1942) published *Manimekalai* (1898)—the *Sangam* Epic—where he translated the available narrative on Buddhism from Rhys Davis, Monier Williams, and Max Mueller; but Gowthaman claims that he hinduized the Buddha.<sup>11</sup> In this depiction of the Buddha, Brahminism was never disturbed and Buddhism was created to protect caste privileges. Whereas, Maraimalai Adigal (1876-1950)—a Saivaiter, an early proponent of 'Pure Tamil' movement, and an ideologue of the Dravidian nationalist movement—called for the recovery, revival and celebration of an ancient 'Non-Brahmin' Tamil language, religion and culture (Venkatachalapathy, 1995; Vaithees 2014). Adigal described Buddhism as Tamil religion—that valorized and celebrated the 'Non-Brahmin' Tamils—especially without ever looking at it from an anti-caste perspective. Buddhism was used to claim a classical and separate Tamil nationalism resurgently forced by Vellalar—a dominant, Non-Brahmin, land-holding caste—movement and Saivism. Similarly, Gowthaman identifies that atheistic Self-Respect and Dravidian-Shudra movements too used Buddhism for its political and cultural content.<sup>12</sup>

However, Gowthaman argues that even before the term 'engaged Buddhism' came up in the 1960s, the oppressed Dalits had reworked on a Buddhist identity in a very engaging way. They developed it as a new transformatory tradition. Thass engaged with other Tamil Buddhists such as P. Lakshmi Narasu and M. Singaravelu along with Theosophical Society's Olcott, Blavatsky, and Dharmapala, in their work for other oppressed Dalits. Thass also founded the "South Indian Buddhist Associations" and "Sakhya Buddhist *Sangams*", while recreating Buddhism through traditional Tamil grammar, literature, ethics, culture, and history but also as an existential religious route.

Gowthaman finds a fundamental difference between Thass and Lakshmi Narasu—the professor from Madras who was a pioneer to research and write on Buddhism in English in his *The Essence of Buddhism* (1907), which had inspired B.R. Ambedkar to write a foreword. Gowthaman argues that though Narasu had

a specific critique of the Hinduized Buddhism, Thass strongly contests it. Any rationalistic proposition of Buddhism that rejects a corporal practise of religion is not Buddhism for Thass. In many ways, Gowthaman states that Thass' Buddhism was very different from what others were doing at the same time.<sup>13</sup> Thass was acting during a socio-historical context where both British imperialistic trend and the Brahminized elite merged. Even assertion against colonial domination took the shape of the casteist, Brahminized, Hindu nationalism. R. Sundaralingam designates that the period 1820 to 1890 made the Brahmins very powerful in the subcontinent. The reasons he attributes for this power-shift are religious and socio-cultural hegemony, the change in agrarian economy coupled by governmental power, both administrative and state (Sundaralingam, 1974: 68).

However, this period also saw a mushrooming of many societies and journals. Of importance is the Theosophical Society that shifted its base to Adyar, Madras in 1882. It was mostly supported by the Indian governmental gentry. However, there is a specific link between the work of colonel Olcott and work on Tamil Buddhism. The society, under the leadership of both Olcott and Blavatsky, started schools for Dalits. Until 1907, before the death of Olcott and the shift of leadership to Annie Besant, Thass had maintained a close relationship with them. Thass met Olcott during the years 1896 to 1898. He starts the South Indian Sakhya Buddhist Sangha in 1898, and the South Indian Buddhist Sangha from 1898 to 1907. S.I.B.A.-s were established in Marikuppam (Kolar Gold Field), Bangalore, and Hubli apart from North Arcot, Madras, Royapeta, Perambur, and Rangoon. Thass was a pioneer in converting many depressed classes to Buddhism in these cities through the work of these societies (Kshirsagar, 1994: 387). These centres became catalysts for transformation of anti-caste politicization and cultural content of Dalits.

Thass worked in these societies first, working among Dalits, and then started his journal *Tamizhan* in 1907 when colonel Olcott died. The *Sanghas* were started in Madras, Perambur, and the

Kolar Gold Fields where the oppressed communities had migrated. They had settled down in these industrial towns during the colonial period. The journal came to these societies as a declaration to claim the religion of the caste-less Dravidians to counter Brahminism. Thass variably used the ancient Tamil Epics, literature, Buddhist books and oral narratives to constitute Buddhism as the original religion of the most oppressed—the ones who were the most affected by caste (Gowthaman, 2004: 70).

He had to categorically differentiate the idea of religion as caste-less, to place the experiential view of the most oppressed by caste at the centre. He differentiated Buddhism from the religion of the Saivaites and Vaishnavaites. He broke the essential Orientalist construction that non-Christian, non-Muslim, and non-Sikh people are Hindus. He requested the oppressed Tamils to register as 'original Tamils' in the 1881 census of the colonial state. From 1911 to 1921, especially after the death of Thass, Dravidian Buddhist numbers increased. It was during this time that Mysore and the Kolar Gold Field played a significant role in spreading Buddhism and education amongst the oppressed communities. Monks from Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, and Siam preached at Kolar Gold Field.

It was through libraries and printing press that this transformation could be engineered by Thass. Marikuppam, for instance, had a library and a Buddhist research centre. Not only did they become pioneering discussion forums on caste rejection, but also initiated self-respect marriages. They used the books *Thirukural* and *Dhammapadam* during the wedding ceremonies. Thass' books did a cultural awakening at the level of writing. His books *Buddharadhu Aadhivedham* and *Indhirar Dhesa Sarithiram* are interesting treatises on history and religion. By reconstructing myths and legends from an anti-caste location, Thass continuously debated with the Brahminization of Tamil and Indian history in the Tamil weekly *Swadesamitran* and *India* (Gowthaman, 2004: 70-75).

Interestingly, Thass had also raised questions about caste in the context of South Africa. He particularly contested the complaints that Indians reported, on being discriminated differentially, in the

journals. He compared it with other reports where Dalits were portrayed in a very bad light. His writings against caste were generated from informative political circles. It was during the British rule that Dalits worked and progressed as butlers, watchmen, and medicants, and worked in hospitals, railways, and the military. Thass could work among them and write, while using resurgent Buddhism, education, medicine (*Siddha*), and journalism as basic frames. This was transforming him into an intellectual who foregrounded a civilizational memory that rooted in a treatise of ethics. Buddhism was not only propounded as an alternative within vernacular (Tamil) to Brahminical violence, but also its ideological frames were rooted in a textuality of non-violence.

Thass' intellectual enterprise is an effort to contest history and reject the fatal hermeneutics of birth-centrism. Along with the Dalits of his time, his work primarily described a desire for a just world that is against birth-sanctioned Brahminism. The Societies, *Sabhas*, and *Sanghas*—a *communitas* of a kind—that were formed during this time, fundamentally, mobilized the Dalits to seek emancipation from the resources that they possessed. In other words, they operated from within where Buddhism was sought as a textual resource towards a self-emancipation (Gowthaman, 2004: 81).

Gowthaman rightly criticizes, in his own wit, and shares the Dalit critique of the Dravidian movement. He asks whether the Non-Brahmin atheists contested and annihilated caste-religious traditions which were propagated by the Brahmins. In other words, has the Non-Brahmin conglomeration de-Brahminized themselves? In a way, he did not differentiate too much from the Dalit critiques on the Non-Brahmin category and identity. In fact, he places Thass at the centre of the critique against the Non-Brahmin Dravidian movement.

In a rather prolific critique and self-introspection, it was G. Aloysius who clearly states that even “the later *Tamizhan*'s resentment on the Dravidian-Self Respect movement”, after Thass, and “the generosity which the Tamil Buddhist movement showed on other anti-caste movements were not sufficiently reciprocated”

(Aloysius, 2010: 270-271). Accordingly, the self-respect movement, he claims, was not always forthcoming in censuring the Non-Brahmin caste atrocities on the *Adi-Dravidas*. *Tamizhan*, the journal, and the anti-caste movement by the Tamil Buddhists became an inferior partner, and a Brahminical pattern of power congruence seem to work as caste-power among the Non-Brahmin conglomerates, particularly against the *Adi-Dravidas*. Hence the primary goal of the anti-caste movement, which is ‘the abolition of caste’, was relegated (Aloysius, 2010: 270). He suggests, however, that Thass' movement was a scintillating attack for the abolition of caste and *varna* that would secure a holistic transformation for its worst victims. Though an active and hegemonic presence of the dominant forces engaged in the ceaseless process of thwarting or co-opting the Subaltern agenda, Aloysius argues that an effective and inclusive identity was instituted throughout the life of the journal (272).

#### d. *Foregrounding Consciousness*

Gajendran Ayyathurai, in turn, concretely supports the argument to understand the Tamil Buddhist as an emancipated identity particularly founded on anti-caste consciousness. He argues that the *Tamizhan* archives (1907-1914) reveal three discursive modes of identification namely—oppositional, re-constructive, and representational.<sup>14</sup> He systematically studies the movement and suggests that these modes are not just to contest the colonial and caste power that categorizes and marginalizes people in terms of oppression such as lower castes, depressed classes, Sakkiliars, Pallars, Parayars and so on. Rather, these are “articulations about the self-perception and self-identity of such people beyond the terms of caste” (Ayyathurai, 2011: 213).

He suggests that this Subaltern consciousness emerged at a time when civil society was dominated by three axes of power; first, the Brahmin “brokered, glibly secular, nationalist movement” (213); secondly, an emergent Non-Brahmin upper-caste movement to displace the Brahmins; and thirdly, the scholarly world which

was dominated by colonialists, Orientalists, and nationalists which assumed the inabilities of Dalits (213-214). Hence, this movement, he states, worked against the scholarly world by critically exposing their social conditions, while continuously speaking and writing about them. He contrasts by stating that the Tamil Buddhists demonstrated their “anti-caste *imaginare* discursively, to compel us to rethink the way the marginalized of the caste system are viewed” (214). Hence, their stand point of Tamil Buddhism was against the caste system; their anti-caste consciousness and religion was inclusive and open to people irrespective of their linguistic and ex-caste status.

Moreover, Ayyathurai hints that a holistic view of Thass places him as “a man who was taking in and reacting to global developments and socio-religious movements on the one hand, and the Indian anti-colonial movement, on the other” (215). Therefore, his primarily goal, annihilation of caste was inseparably linked with reorganizing the land to which he belonged, which was mediated through what he saw around the world. Thass, hence, took up Buddhism as the most viable religion that could open up the possibility of a casteless nation. Ayyathurai further builds the argument that Thass’ understanding of Buddhism was actually transnational, though founded particularly in Tamil. He unveils an openness to other ‘nations’ and cultures. This propels against a ritualized Tamil nationalism that encourage orthodoxies and divisions between women and men. Hence, Ayyathurai claims that Thass cannot be a religious nationalist.

Importantly, he theorizes that Thass’ Tamil Buddhism constructed a political identity including religious and linguistic elements that would enable an inclusionary collective and a casteless society. Hence, Thass was not a Dravidian nationalist as well. Thass viewed Buddhism as an anti-caste way of life in the subcontinent, but insisted on regionalizing Buddhism in the lingua franca, instead of any other language of the past or present hegemony (Ayyathurai, 2011: 217). Hence, Ayyathurai states that Thass is not a rabid nationalist because he advocates intermixtures between people and linguistic diversity.

Lastly to summarize the take on the Dravidian movement, Ayyathurai argues that the Buddhist movement of Thass and his associates took two different routes. Firstly, there are generations that followed Thass which have continued to hold onto ideas of Tamil Buddhism to the present. They trace their legacy as ‘descendants’ of Tamil Buddhism (Ayyathurai, 2011: 218). On the other hand, he states that, it influenced two strands of the ‘Non-Brahmin movement’—the Saivaite self-respecters and the Self-Respect movement itself.<sup>15</sup> However, Thass’ venture into the notions of ethics, castelessness, and critical humanism need investigation in the context where Non-Brahmin politics has lent itself to accommodating various castes other than the Brahmins, particularly those who stand against social transformation of the most oppressed—the Dalits (Ayyathurai, 2011: 220).

Taking this a little forward, Thass tries to conceptualize a caste-less community as a way of life against Brahminism or caste-immunization, which is possible through recovering from history a Buddhism in the Tamil language. The texts on Buddhism and history calls for a serious study to critically evaluate casteless-ness in the vernacular. These texts have been written to reconstruct a critical anti-caste tradition as a Buddhist way of life. This leads one to think that the anti-caste intellectual thought that the Dalit intellectuals produced in the early twentieth century has a counter view on caste and religion. In this, they are making a civilizational claim. Thass, through his Buddhist writings, reworks a genealogy of loss. However, he recovers it through a civilizational memory in Tamil Buddhism—a civilizational claim against caste that envisions a post-caste imaginary as genealogy.

## Conclusion

This paper captures the academic discourse of Thass within Tamil and anti-caste studies and highlights the case for a rereading of his texts for the political present. It lays out the debates that had happened within the English academia and the Tamil public sphere and studies Thass as discourse and critique through two trajectories—Non-Brahmin discourse and Anti-Caste critique. The paper discusses



how Thass was made part of an anti-caste discourse, as a memory and as a part of Dalit intellectual legacy in the vernacular during the 1990s, where new radical anti-caste figures were discovered. Besides, the paper also suggests that a hermeneutics of experience and community would offer a different way to study Thass' writings and argues why religious texts that were produced by Thass should be taken seriously to conceptualize an open, caste-less community in practice.

While scholars have debated over this anti-caste legacy, it is also true that an insistence on studying Ambedkar as the only anti-caste philosopher singularly for a nationalist and/or post-colonialist political thought, or even the Dravidian ideologues as exemplars of Self-Respect movement for the Tamil country, seem to cut-short the genealogy on which anti-caste thought as a legacy stand on. In fact, an attempt to even conceptualize the deadly attack on Brahminism and Hinduism through Thass' writings on Buddhism are rarely highlighted. One needs to conceptualize the radical anti-caste thought that expressed itself through religion as a civilizational claim and as a coming community. Hence a radical rereading of past through history as pedagogy is to be practiced.

## Endnotes

1. Aloysius, Geetha, and Rajadurai are independent scholars who have written extensively on the anti-caste, Dravidian, Non-Brahmin and Self-Respect movements. Pandian, a historian and academic, has also contributed in this field. Ayyathurai is a Historical Anthropologist based in Germany who works on Iyothee Thass and the Tamil Buddhist movement. Gowthaman, Dharmaraj, and Rajangam are Tamil scholars and writers based in Tamil Nadu.
2. It is generally understood that Dalit writing—as a political act—emerged during the late 1990s, particularly during the hundredth birth anniversary of Babasaheb Ambedkar, the unparalleled leader and icon of the oppressed across post-Independent India. Dalit politics too emerged, particularly in the Tamil political sphere with the rise of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* (Liberation Panthers) and *Puthiya Tamizhagam* (New Tamil Nadu). This

was ably supported by the rise of 'little magazines' in the publication field especially with the circulation of *Dalit Murasu* and *Nirapirakai*. This promoted writers, particularly Dalits, to express and study anti-caste history and thought that had politically a Dalit foregrounding. Many writers explored Dalit poetry, prose, intellectual thought and history, and figures like Iyothee Thass, Rettamalai Srinivasan, Gurusamy, M.C. Rajah, N. Sivaraj, Meenambal, Appaduraiyar etc., were rediscovered.

3. To exaggerate and extend a little bit, it is not hard to notice that Ambedkar and his followers claimed that Jyotirao Phule was his/their pre-cursor and guide for the movement against caste in Maharashtra and elsewhere. Whereas, no such claims are made by either Periyar or his followers. Ayyathurai tritely argues that the Dalits never assumed the egalitarian treatment in Non-Brahmin consciousness. They were ambiguously placed, he claims, in the Non-Brahmin discourse. This led to "the retention of a dichotomy between the Dalits and non-brahmins unsurprisingly, as it was between the non-brahmins and brahmins" (Ayyathurai, 2011: 25). He concludes thus—while Thass' articulations precede Periyar's critique of caste and Brahminism "by more than three decades", what remains unexamined or acknowledged is the connection between their palpable resonations (219).
4. Though these organizations have disappeared after the death of Thass—some even during his life-time—discontinuity of centres of activism as a mark to evaluate or reject a social movement is ineffectual and not genuine. This reading surely belies Pandian's credentials as a brilliant scholar and exponent of Subaltern and Dravidian Studies—he could have been just better. Meanwhile, Geetha (2017) too, changing her earlier position, came-up with an evocative critique on the hinduization of the Non-Brahmins titled "*Paarpanaraladhar Saadhi Indhukkalaga Maariya Kadhai*" [How Non-Brahmins became Caste-Hindus—The Story] in Tamil, but not in English. In contrast, works by Aloysius (1998), Gowthaman (2004), Dharmaraj (2007), Ayyathurai (2011), and Rajangam (2016) study Thass through different modes of enquiry—sociological, religious, cultural, historical-anthropology, and literary—as an anti-caste organic intellectual, who also worked on an epistemology against Hinduism as a social movement. I discuss this in the later part of the paper.
5. Accusing the Dalit movement as compliant agents of capitalism and its political regime, Ambedkar and Ambedkarites are also termed as

treacherous. They subordinate the poor and toiling sections of lower caste masses to the regime of rich and elite Marxists blames, despite their demagoguery for the poor and the downtrodden. Accounting 29 venomous essential differences between the Ambedkarites and the Marxists, the article purports that Ambedkar must be opposed. It also substantially reproduces a partial biography of Ambedkar, which apparently terms him as a bourgeois liberal, an avowed anti-Marxist, a coward Brahminical, and a servant of the capital. See “Why Marxists must Oppose Ambedkar and Ambedkarism?” <http://workersocialist.blogspot.de/2015/04/why-marxists-oppose-ambedkar-and.html>.

6. Pandian opined that Thass is closer to Maraimalai Adigal, though not similar, because there was a parallel between the Tamil they deployed. He states that the discursive strategies used by both were common. They both used ideas of: ‘golden ageism’, the deployment of the conceit of the Brahmin, Brahminical religious practices as selective borrowings from indigenous Tamils, and foregrounding a hierarchy of values to define oneself. However, Pandian uncritically equates Thass with Adigal. Unlike many Subaltern Tamil intellectuals of his times, Thass used the classical commentarial style in writing selectively. Extremely known for his wit, Thass’ use of Epic-style, narrative based, historical investigations, as well as, recording oral traditions present among the oppressed castes were also written in the journalistic prose form. The style of writing, hence, was also experimental as it went against external resource-based historical writing. He used this style well, to create a cosmology of anti-caste imaginary within a resistant tradition in Tamil language. In that, he was countering received notions of caste cosmologies of Brahminical Hinduism through Tamil Buddhism. He wrote and worked through Subaltern religious movements to differentiate them from the dominant ones in the early twentieth century. In comparison, hence, though Adigal started a federation called *Podhu Nilai Kazhagam* (Common Value Federation), he conveniently declined and refused equality to a multitude of lower caste Tamils in his writings. Thass, though used a supposedly high-Tamil register, worked amongst the oppressed masses; but was dismissively equated with Adigal by Pandian 2007: 138-141.
7. Dharmaraj disagrees with the reasons Pandian gives for the sudden and simultaneous emergence of the Brahmin caste along with the configuration of Hinduism and nationalism. Pandian indicates that the scathing critiques

propounded by European missionaries and the ancient glory of Hinduism discovered by Orientalists like Annie Besant were the causes; but Dharmaraj pin points that the marginalized communities used the missionaries as ‘tools to give them voice’. They were served through them what they formerly lacked access to—education, jobs, and economic opportunities. Thus, it was often the case with movements such as: Muthu Kutty Samigal and the *Ayyavazhi* movement in Southern Tamil Nadu, and Iyothee Thassa Pandithar and the Tamil Buddhist movement in Northern Tamil Nadu, which particularly focused on emancipation from oppression. Pandian fails to recognize, he argues, that they sought to uproot cultural domination by rejecting Hinduism and caste. While Thass, like other such tall anti-caste figures, constructed a collective identity for the marginalized, Pandian inappropriately relegated him as a “Parayar Buddhist”.

8. Tamil Dalit intellectual Ravikumar criticizes the academic works of M.S.S. Pandian, V. Geetha, S.V. Rajadurai, and S. Anandhi for uncritically overlooking the flaws and problems of the Dravidian movement and history that had at its core a Brahmin and Non-Brahmin alliance of dominance. He states that the academic Non-Brahmin antagonism against Brahmins historically alternated between conflict and cooperation. He counters the Non-Brahmin histories with the works by historians such as David Washbrook and Eugene Irschick who had, on the other hand, engaged critically with the thrust of the Non-Brahmin movement. He suggests that the Brahmin and higher Non-Brahmin caste alliance played a crucial role in the institutionalization of untouchability and the caste-system in Tamil Nadu. Much clearly, he identifies that, the enthusiastic Non-Brahmin alliance with the Brahmins led to the destruction of Buddhism and Jainism in Tamil Nadu, *Vedic-Brahmin* religion taking root, caste-system getting strengthened, and untouchability becoming entrenched (Ravikumar and Azhagarasan, 2012: xv-xxxiii).
9. Along with the Tamil Buddhist movement, Aloysius particularly mentions about the *Sri Narayana Guru Dharma Paripalana* (S.N.D.P.) amongst Ezhavas of Kerala, the *Ayyavazhi* of Sri Muthukuttysamy among Shanars of Tamil Nadu, *Rajayogi-Mallas*, *Narsiah* sects among Madigas, *Bhima Boi* and *Mahima Dharam* among Baunis of Orissa, *Matua* cult of popular Vaishnavasim, Other ‘lower’ caste Subaltern movements such as—*Ramdeo Panth*, *Satnami*, *Naval Dharm*, etc. as well as conversions to Christianity in Brethren church and the *Prathyaksha Raksha Deiva*

- Sabha* in Kerala, ‘Hindu church’ and Salvation Army in Tamil Nadu. These religious movements of colonial India were categorized as religions of the oppressed. They sought, he argues, a “universal-ethics” as a continuity of the age-old heterodox traditions of the subcontinent. They symbolized a life-world where religious cultures were optional and choice-based. They prioritized commitment and congruence which thrusts towards democracy and egalitarianism. An “elective affinity” between Buddhism and the life-world of non-privileged classes (Aloysius, 1998: 17-20).
10. Dharmaraj explains the false discourse on Buddhism in the Tamil public sphere during the nineteenth century. Buddhism is understood as an ethics-based disciplinary code that had script and written language. The fault line of Tamil history teaches, exposes Thass, that the defeat of Tamil is due to the Jain and Buddhist encroachment from outside. Vaishnavism and Saivism, invested through Tamil—which was treated as a religion—gave an outsider status to Tamil-Jainism and Buddhism. It was projected that to care for Saivism and Vaishnavism was to care and develop Tamil, Tamil People and Tamil culture. Language, religion, and culture triad was developed to protect caste in the Tamil region. Saivaites and Vaishnavites used Tamil to develop a canonical triad to protect caste culture. It was, hence, Dalits like Iyothee Thass who used expansive Tamil Buddhism that united *Samanam* (indigenous Jainism) and *Bouddham* (indigenous Buddhism) in Tamil to create a caste-less cosmology (Dharmaraj, 2007: 56-82).
  11. U.V. Swaminatha Iyer (1855-1942) was a distinguished scholar-editor, who is claimed to have resurrected Tamil’s rich ancient literature and cultural heritage from the appalling neglect and destruction. He brought a major bulk of Tamil’s ancient and medieval literature—particularly *Sangam*—from palm-leaf manuscripts into print, starting from *Sivakachinthamani* (1887), *Silappadhikaram* (1892), and *Manimekalai* (1898) and so on. Often glaringly celebrated as the deacon of Tamil classical studies, Swaminatha Iyer is credited with studying multiple palm-leaf manuscript, which set him on journeys to comparatively study and fill the gaps in order to eliminate any interpolations. On *Manimekalai*, particularly, Iyer dealt with the Buddhist philosophy, its institutions etc., as if he had nothing to go by at all in Tamil; and as he found no Buddhists at all in the Tamil speaking world nor in the subcontinent, he had to take recourse to some commentaries on *Kundalakesi*, while appending

- quotes from fifty-nine Tamil works and twenty-nine Sanskrit works and their commentaries to claim an encyclopaedic authority on the text (Lal, 1992: 4255-4258).
12. Maraimalai Adigal’s works seem to have envisioned a religious pre-history to the radical Dravidian or ‘Tamil-only’ movement. In this, his attempt was also to see the writings within a dominant caste (Vellalar) perspective, while celebrating a ‘Non-Brahmin’ cultural and social world (Vaithees, 2014).
  13. Lakshmi Narasu created an engaged Buddhism that is modern and scientific. It became a tool for opposing caste, religion, and Vedic Brahminism through a scientific religion. However, Thass at the same time built another Buddhism with a different content. Gowthaman accounts their differences, along with the basic principles forwarded by Lakshmi Narasu (Gowthaman, 2004: 32-65).
  14. Ayyathurai delineates these three modes of self-identification and perception as—firstly, that the marginalized communities, such as the Parayars, discursively opposed their subjugation in anti-caste terms against both caste and colonial power of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; secondly, they went on to reject the classifications made by caste and colonial authorities as Parayars, and re-articulated themselves as Tamil Buddhists in a variety of ways as they established a positive collective identity and history; and thirdly, they shaped their material histories and potentialities not only through conventional practices of petitioning the colonial government, but also by mobilizing their own resources to establish inclusive casteless institutions of social change (Ayyathurai, 2011).
  15. Ayyathurai states that the Tamil Saivaite movement through Vedachalam’s books such as *Tamizhar Madham* (1941) internalized Tamil Buddhist ideas such as anti-caste and anti-Brahmin vibes, and particularly the significance of Tamil as a vehicle of castelessness. It wanted to create a Saivaite effect on the basis of Tamil Buddhist arguments, he argues. However, despite its postures, Vedachalam upholds caste divisions among those he calls Non-Brahmins; notably the Parayars are put back in the most marginalized state in much the same ways as the Brahmins did, he continues. Hence, the *Tamizhar* of the Saivaite movement and Vedachalam was not caste-free despite the traces of Tamil Buddhist ideas, he claims. In the case of the Self-Respect movement, Ayyathurai states after firmly going through the archival proofs that, many of Periyar’s views on idol worship, religious superstitions,

gender issues, on the one hand, and welcoming science and technologies as a way out of caste, religious obscurantism, and poverty in India, on the other, resonate with the articulations of Thass (218-219).

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## **Making of a Normative Meetei: Re-reading Khwairakpam Chaoba and Lamabam Kamal**

*Thongam Bipin<sup>1</sup>*

Literatures have emerged as representations of a region or a nation with a fixed or certain idea of territory in various phases of history. The attribution of territory and nationhood to literatures and languages has been happening in the last two and a half centuries with the encounter between literatures and modernity.<sup>2</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj states that linguistic identity is not a primordially available category for communities as nationalists would tend to propagate. He says, "Political identities based on language are .... modern though the languages on which they are based have a distinct historical existence from much earlier times"<sup>3</sup> (148). Same can be said of literatures. Literatures representing a nation or a community are a recent phenomenon. He further illustrates the link between colonialism and the growth of linguistic identity in the Indian sub-continent. In the case of South Indian languages as well, linguistic identities are comparatively new. Languages were not a political category and did not have a fixed territorial boundary for a long time.<sup>4</sup> Correlation and assigning of language with a boundary and an association of languages with individual and community identities happened at a particular historical juncture of modernity in the sub-continent (Mitchel, 2009).

The "affective relation" (Mitchel, 2009) with languages and the emergence of terms like *Tamilpattra*<sup>5</sup> and *Meetei Chanu*<sup>6</sup>