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# One Step Inside *Tamilian*: On the Anti-Caste Writing of Language

Dickens Leonard M.

The relationship between caste and language in South Asia is a contentious topic of research today. Many have studied how modernity constructed language and caste as political categories in India. Writing that contests caste in modern times, especially after the emergence of Dalit politics and literature, has been a subject of serious academic enquiry. However, there is also an increasing worry about the absence of prominent Dalit journalists, and a lack of Dalit media practitioners in contemporary India. This injustice haunts the public sphere even today.<sup>1</sup> And not many have seriously studied the history of this negligent absence.

In this context, this paper sets out to study Pandit Iyothee Thass (1845–1914), an anti-caste Tamil intellectual, and his engagement with Tamil-print in the early twentieth century. Thass ran the magazine *Tamizhan* (*Tamilian*, 1907–14), which particularly revived interest in Buddhism as an anti-caste religion, in the early twentieth century. The magazine was instrumental in creating an anti-caste vernacular-cosmology of those times. Thass was an intellectual: an expert reader, referee, writer, polyglot, publisher and organiser; he initiated a resistant knowledge practice by using journalism as a tool to gain inroads into the print public sphere, which was undeniably caste-ridden. Forty-two such Tamil journals – by Dalits – were run from 1850 to 1947 in the Madras Presidency (Balasubramaniam, 2016). Why such an event in print history is erased from public memory calls for a serious enquiry. Particularly the role of academics and history-writing in India calls for a critical anti-caste perspective. Hence a revisit, so as to re-evaluate that historical moment of erasure, is imperative to capture the prolific Dalit participation and contribution to emancipatory knowledge practice in print-language.

Part of the title of this paper is a subversion of M.S.S. Pandian's famous article, 'One Step Outside Modernity' (2002).<sup>2</sup> I critically engage with his article so as to study and understand a minor-position on print and modernity (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986). Particularly, how those most oppressed by caste – the Dalits – use the reserves of language in order to constitute a cosmology of castelessness through print. In order to weave a critical anti-caste perspective, from where it matters, I use 'Dalit' as not a definitive category. It is positioned as an exposure to various possibilities of experience. Especially, exiting out of the image of the Dalit as a broken-being, this paper breaks this typical continuity to

study how Dalits use modern print and how print-history experiences anti-caste writing.

The paper extends Sanal Mohan's thesis, but also Gopal Guru's<sup>3</sup> – to argue that though it is important to think that there is an emphasis laid on the radical practice in 'non-written histories' of subaltern/minority communities, it is also important to underline subaltern articulations regarding the inevitability of written history as resource to counter hegemonic structures. Hence, the centrality ascribed to the written word and written history for a possible salvation of exploited and oppressed minorities seems to, primarily, complicate critical categories we have for nation, literature, and language in a triangular formulation. This paper is concerned with the question: how instrumental is writing for oppressed communities, such as Dalits, to embark a step inside modern history and constitute a caste-less language? In this context, the paper interrogates Pandian's claim and asks: is one step outside modernity two steps outside tradition? Or, more particularly, if one has to step outside modernity, where does that 'one step' step into?

First, the article discusses Pandian's texts and lays out the Dalit critique so as to describe why the most oppressed of castes had to historically engage with print and modernity. Secondly, it gives an account of how an embodied Dalit counter-public had to work on alternative epistemological practices using journalistic print, rather than the book, as a dominant print form which the caste-public practised profusely. Thirdly, Thass's industrious work as an organic intellectual is highlighted with his contribution to Tamil journalistic print and creative knowledge practice that prioritises an anti-caste point of view.

### **'One Step Outside Modernity' and the Dalit Critique**

In the context of the post-Mandal agitations and debates where discussions on caste, Dalit politics and public sphere were rampant (Ilaiah, 1996, 1998; Guru, 2000; Nigam, 2000; Nanda, 2001), Pandian argued that the lower castes' contradictory engagement with modernity and politics has a message for the present. He strongly propounded that being 'one step outside modernity' (Pandian, 2002) alone can guarantee them a public where the politics of difference through caste can articulate itself. Caste can emerge as a legitimate category of democratic politics, he argued, for democracy to take root properly in India. Colonialism made the 'national community' speak in two competing sets of languages dealing with the issue of caste. The dominant caste nationalists, he stated, spoke of caste by other means, and the oppressed talked about caste on its 'own terms'.

He furthered his argument thus: the nationalist resolution against colonialism was not founded 'on the divide between spiritual and material' (Chatterjee, 1986, 1997). It rendered the mode of talking caste not on its own terms. There was an intimacy sought between modernity and also a desire to keep caste out of the public sphere. He says that if we plura-

lise 'national community' and 'national culture', the obvious triumph of dominant nationalism over colonialism would at once emerge as a story of domination over varied sections of the subaltern social groups within the nation. In other words, if one foregrounds dominant nationalism in an oppositional dialogue with the subaltern social groups within the nation, instead of colonialism, the divide between the spiritual and material, inner and outer, would tell us stories of domination and exclusion. This would be under the sign of culture and spirituality *within* the so called national community itself. Hence, the subaltern counter-public, he argued, had an 'antagonistic indebtedness' to modernity as it emerged in India. That is, they had to engage and rely on the same modernity as the dominant castes, so that caste is contested tooth and nail.

'Language became a zone over which the nation first had to declare its sovereignty and then had to transform in order to make it adequate for the modern world' argued Pandian. However, he had only studied how Sanskrit and English were doing this in the Indian context in the article. The idea of a sovereign nation emerging firstly in the language-zone against colonial powers with an 'antagonistic indebtedness' is an important idea that I would like to push back, just before the nationalist period in Madras Presidency. However, why such an analysis was not done in the vernacular languages – Tamil, for instance – seeks special attention. This especially so for the Dalit counter-publics that produced anti-caste writing. Why and how different kinds of nations as imaginaries competed against each other, in the same language, was never given a serious thought, especially in the context of print-public spheres and the changed reading practices that print created. Could one step outside vernacular modernity in one's trenchant critique against caste?

M.S.S. Pandian, in his seminal work *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin* (2007), which studied the Tamil political history, combined Thass with Maraimalai Adigal (1876–1950) – a Tamil intellectual who revived Saivism through the pure-Tamil movement – to conceptualise how the new voice of the 'non-Brahmin' speaks of the other and makes its own self (102–143). Though Pandian acknowledges that a network of associational life in the Madras Presidency, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, was run by the oppressed so as to air their views and grievances by setting up publishing tracts and organisations, he understands them as only being talkative about the Brahmin. That is, they did not talk about themselves towards a community of freedom, be they 'untouchables, Sudras, neo-Buddhists, Saivaites, and rationalists' (102). He argues that Thass had to talk about the Brahmin in order to talk about one's emancipatory self. This is an inadequate reading as it doesn't account, if not deny, the role of the oppressed communities' fight against caste through persistent intellectual labour, an ingenious and idiosyncratic interpretation of etymology, and remarkable flights of imagination.

Apart from calling Iyothee Thass an untouchable 'Parayar' intellectual, a term that Thass found derogatory and had outrightly rejected, Pandian termed Thass as an exemplar of old-word intellectuals in the Tamil region. Textualism and religious debate were the only modes of cultural intervention, he claimed, that Thass practised. Hence his critiques of the Brahmin were primarily in the domain of culture, Pandian clarified. Though Thass had started an Advaidananda Sabha (1870) and later the Dravida Mahajana Sabha (1891) in the Nilgiris, and a grassroots organisation, the Sakya Buddhist Sangam (1898), in Madras and the northwestern region of the Presidency, Pandian had failed to recognise 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. Pandian claimed that Thass's insistent aim to start the magazine *Tamizhan*, in 1907, was just a self-conscious pedagogy. Thass had written that he started this magazine so as 'to teach justice, right path, and truthfulness to people who could not discriminate between the excellent, the mediocre, and the bad' (Aloysius, 1998: 61).

While Thass treated history and writing as a pedagogic act, Pandian declares that Thass's 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 'Parayar' and Brahmins. However, he also indicates the absence of any historiographic details that makes the claims of Thass of revelatory and mythic quality. It is unfortunate to not note that messianic claims through religion have been a universal claim for emancipation and resistance of the oppressed across the world.<sup>4</sup>

For instance, T. Dharmaraj, a Tamil intellectual, in this context had a riveting critique of Pandian's formulations on the Brahmin and the non-Brahmin.<sup>5</sup> He argued that Pandian's theoretical concepts lack particular use for the Tamil society as he only writes for 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'. Also, understanding colonialism as the sole cause for the emergence of the Brahmin figure, with an inadequate perspective on Iyothee Thass and oppressed communities' engagement with colonialism, and finally, depicting Dravidian politics as 'subaltern', are problematic.<sup>6</sup> Dharmaraj argued 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.

In similar terms, a strong critique is made against the post-colonial/subaltern theorisations of Indian modernity and caste from the standpoint of vernacular cosmopolitanism – which is anti-caste and a 'Dalit point of

view?<sup>7</sup> This is theorised from the position that foregrounds literatures of the world that are grounded, and not of world literatures that are linked to each other in abstraction (Shankar, 2012). Shankar offers a genuine critique of the post-colonial, transnational cosmopolitanism, and reverses the attention to vernacular cosmopolitanism. He argues that the elitist post-colonialism created the vernacular as parochial and the space where caste resides as a residue. Hence he claims that in their writings and films, the outcaste as a figure lurks as a shadow throughout (ibid., p. 29). It is suggestive that the most oppressed, however, used the vernacular to counter caste so as to offer a cosmopolitan framework of emancipatory humanism from their given position.

On many levels, hence, Pandian's reading dismisses, if not misleads, 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 colonially situated discourse; 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.

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, so as to create a religion and culture against caste. Not only interpreting that the metaphysics of caste as an enforced hierarchy remained largely intact in Thass, but reading his discourses as only underscoring the continuing power of the Brahmin in the Tamil context is more than vindictive. Pandian, hence, 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.

Thass founded a counter-throw through re-imagining a history of language – Tamil – that rationalises a caste-less sociality. This counter-throw on history and writing practised by Thass is pedagogic because change is the ultimate desire. Thass's writings have insisted on a rationalised community while imagining about a language. Taking a cue from this significant critique, the paper moves on to read Iyothee Thass's effort to create a vernacular cosmopolitan that is anti-caste, in the Tamil print public sphere, during the early twentieth century. The most oppressed by caste, used

journals to create a language that could print a caste-less world, so as to belong and communicate, through a critical interpretative practice. Hence, the Dalits used the reserves of language to explore print-modernity for an anti-caste exploration. But they were also experimental in their practice of knowledge. This was, however, never recognised by even thoughtful historians of Tamil print history.

### **Print, Reading–Writing Practices, Anti-Caste Public Sphere**

Modern print as a subject of research enquiry has kept many historians, philologists, media theorists and linguists busy. As often theorised, slowly yet systematically, print paved ways to make language largely soundless (McLuhan, 1962). Printed truths privileged the eye more than any other sensory organ. Besides, print inscribed languages, and therefore knowledge, into a visual bias (Ivins, 1969). Hence, print capitalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries could evoke the idea of a nation as ‘imagined political community’, a derivative category, in many countries as languages and nations were simultaneously produced through print-modernity (Anderson, 1991). In Indian languages, particularly, the complex relationship between orality, print history and nation has been a subject of scholarly interest for some time now (Blackburn, 2003). Despite serious research in this field, these studies do not have much to say about the marginalised regime of truths. In India, what was print to those who were considered outcaste; senses that were ‘untouched’ and ‘unseen’? What does modern print mean to Dalits?

Venkatachalapathy, while recounting the history of reading practices in the colonial Tamil public sphere, studies the Tamil book history, attending to the ways in which reading and learning practices changed as palm-scripts were converted into print (*Province of the Book*, 2012). A particular mode of reading, i.e. silent reading vis-à-vis reading aloud, emerged as a dominant practice. The printed book made silent reading the dominant mode, which was a historical transition from learning by rote and aloud. Venkatachalapathy thus drew attention to the new publics that the printed book was creating, while erasing the older reading–writing practices.

However, while foregrounding such an analysis, he did not adequately reflect on the role of the emergent journalistic practice that gained currency among the most oppressed, in the province that the book created. Nor is there a serious reflection on the Tamil public spheres and its anti-caste counter-publics that journalistic print brought forth. The first Tamil periodical was published by the Christian Religious Tract Society in 1831: *The Tamil Magazine*. The increasing demand of the literate public caused a number of journals and periodicals to be published, and these in turn provided a platform for authors to publish their work. *Rajavritti Bodhini* and *Dina Varthamani* in 1855, and Salem Pagadala Narasimhalu Naidu’s fortnightlies, Salem *Desabhimini* in 1878 and Coimbatore *Kalanidhi* in

1880, were the earliest Tamil journals that are recorded in Tamil journals' history. The first regular newspaper in Tamil was *Swadesamitran* in 1882, started by G. Subramaniya Iyer, editor and sponsor of *The Hindu* and a founding member of the Indian National Congress. When Subramania Iyer quit *The Hindu* in 1898, he made *Swadesamitran* his full-time business. *Swadesamitran* emerged as one of the earliest 'nationalist' dailies in the Tamil public sphere.

Even before the print-flourish gained momentum towards print capitalism of the nationalist kind, the Tamil Dalits used print journals to create an anti-caste community imaginary. They often contested and debated the nationalist aspirations of the dominant castes. This early period is least researched or documented. Many Dalit-subaltern intellectuals attempted to ingeniously create a reading community by using the emergent print reading-writing practice. For instance, names such as C. Iyothee Thass, A.P. Periyasamy Pulavar, T.C. Narayanaswamy Pillai, T.I. Swamykannu Pulavar, Pandit Munusamy, Rettamalai Srinivasan, John Rathinam, Muthuvira Pavalar and K. Swappeneswary Ammal,<sup>8</sup> among others, were pioneers in such participation in journalistic print. This helped in carving out not only a political but also an anti-caste cultural community that reads and writes in public.

Some of the journals that were run by these figures during the latter half of the nineteenth century were: *Suriyodhayam* (1869), *Panchama* (1871), *Sugirdavasini* (1879), *Dravida Pandian* (later *Dravidian*, 1885), *Dravida Mithran* (1885), *Anror Mitran* (1886), *Mahavikatathoothan* (1888), *Paraiyan* (1893), *Illara Ozhukkam* (1898), *Buloga Vasagan* (1900), *Dravida Kokilam* (1907) and *Oru Paisa Tamilan* (later *Tamilian*, 1907). The idea of 'Dravidian'<sup>9</sup> as a political imaginary where anti-caste consciousness was first constituted was also mooted, proposed by the Dalit-subalterns first in the journalistic public sphere. Reading as an embedded activity was going through a tremendous modification. Print cultures introduced a mediatory effect, particularly through journals. Along with book-reading communities, print enunciated 'political imaginaries' of different kinds (Anderson, 1991). The Dalit-subalterns were active agents in such a transition; they were participants in an emergent 'sensorium' that was being modulated as emancipatory, beyond being just considered untouched.

The emergence of print journals in the Tamil public sphere launched debates and discussions on authority, interpretation, different versions of palm-scripts that were converted into print-texts, literary historiography, religious and community claims over literary texts, referencing, and literary criticism, in a heterogeneously politicised Tamil public sphere. The journalistic practice, apparently, created community as a political force that could emerge through print journalism, especially, for the Dalit-subaltern constituencies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But importantly, it was also fashioning new subjects who could sense: read,



touch, smell and cultivate tastes; a research area that is largely omitted and understudied.

### Thass's *Tamizhan*

In this context, Iyothee Thass was a major leader, intellectual and activist whose life, work and legacy have regrettably remained neglected by historians of Tamil Nadu until recently. In many ways a precursor to towering anti-caste figures like E.V. Ramasamy Naicker (1879–1973) and B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), Thass was the first to develop an anti-caste narrative by espousing and writing on Buddhism. He was a practitioner of *Siddha* medicine who, during the 1881 British Indian census, appealed that 'panchamas are not Hindus'. He used literary resources and palm-scripts so as to field anti-caste, Tamil literature and folklore-based explanations of Buddhism. He pioneered the Buddhist movement in the cities where Dalits migrated as coolies, such as Kolar Gold Field in Bangalore, Rangoon and Durban. He devoted time to start separate *viharas*, worship practices, festivals, libraries, schools, burial places and marriage customs so as to reconstruct Dalit history through a Buddhist framework in the vernacular. He did not just work for the religious identity of the Dalits, but for their political, social and economic needs too. This figure, when placed within the Dalit discourse, goes beyond both the 'desi' and the 'derivative' national discourse; though based on a negative, oppositional language, it also transcends into a normative form of thinking, as formulated by Gopal Guru (2011: 36–42). Thass not only constructed an anti-Brahmin discourse as a negative and oppositional stance, he transcended this to create an ethical imaginary in Tamil Buddhism as an embodied cultural legacy for the oppressed to practise anti-caste values through his writings.

*Oru Paisa Tamilian* (later *Tamilian*, 1907–14), the Tamil newspaper, was started on 19 June 1907 from his Royapettah office (Chennai) and printed at the Buddhist Press of Thiru Adimoolam. The intent to publish the journal was 'to teach justice, right path, and truthfulness to people who could not discriminate between the excellent, mediocre and the bad'. The newspaper came week after week for the rest of Thass's life, carrying a wealth of information on current events, interpretation of Tamil history, religion, literature and politics, against the dominant and oppressive religio-cultural discourses of the time, so as to create an alternative discourse. The way he did this is a subject to be analysed.

Thass's *Tamilian* explores the myriad ways to articulate a novel critique, in which the entire system of signs and meanings associated with hierarchy, as imagined by early twentieth-century caste society, was re-evaluated. Thass simultaneously rejected the nationalism propounded by the predominantly upper-caste Congress party and their demand for *swadeshi* by using the print space to create an alternative imaginary. At the same time, he challenged the caste-Hindu domination of the Tamil print public sphere.

Thass used journalism to register serious critiques and discussion, especially on literature and history. He possessed, as his personal collection, a plethora of palm-scripts, to which he referred profusely. He was an expert reader, trained in using print technology. His collection of materials in Tamil included epics, literary texts as well as commentaries, which very few in the early twentieth century even accessed. Genres as various as compendiums, *nigandukal* and epics – *Irattaikaapiyangal*, *Sivaga Sinthamani*, *Soolamani*; didactic literature in verse – *Thirukkural*; grammatical texts – *Nannul*, *Veerazhoyam*; songs from *Naladiyar*, *Kaakkai Adiniyam*, *Kaivalyam*, *Gnanabotham*, *Patinathar*, *Idaikaatusitthar*, *Sivavakkayar*, *Pambattisithar*, *Thayumanavar* and *Agapey Sithar*; texts that were lost and had disappeared from public access – *Thurumandhiram*, *Arungalaseppu*, *Sithandha Kothu*, *Sivayoga Saaram*, *Muudhurai*, *Avvaiyar*, *Needhi Noolgal*, *Kabiralagaval*, *Nalappillai Baratham*, *Gnanabodham*; *Tiripikidam* in Pali and Ashvagosha's text, *Naardhiya Purana Sangath Thellivu*. These palm-texts were circulated, he clarifies, amongst his community members as a legacy. This gives an entirely a different idea about how the oppressed engaged with and produced knowledge during the colonial period, and the emergence of print-modernity.

Thass's proficiency in languages such as Tamil, Pali, Sanskrit and English aided him to refer to these texts and derive a speculative etymology, so as to constitute a creative historiography in his journal commentaries. His Tamil prose was relatively new. His use of the epic style and narrative-based historical investigations makes it difficult to differentiate historical references over images of the text. The style of writing is absolutely experimental as it rebels against an external resource-based historical writing that clarifies, verifies and is evidential. The oral traditions present among the oppressed castes were presented in the journalistic form as commentaries, with which he subverted the existing practices of historical writing. In many ways, his writings inaugurated a millennial narrative on the relationship between language, literature and nation.

For instance, his writings on literature, i.e. *Ilakkiyam*, starts with his commentaries on Valluva Nayanar's *Thirikural* (*Thirukkural*) (Vol. II: 455, 566–779); Auvaiyar's *Thirivasagam* (*Thiruvagasam*) (Vol. II: 456), *Kundalakesi* (Vol. II: 537), *Thenbavani* (Vol. II: 537), *Manimegalai* (Vol. II: 556), *Siddhar Padalgal* (Vol. II: 557), along with discussion on their publication history. These literary criticisms in *Tamilian* (*Iyothee Thassar Sindhanaigal: Religion, Literature*, Volume II, edited by G. Aloysius, 1999) are an alternative attempt at the historical method itself. It is worth studying the intermediary space that Thass was exploring while commenting and writing on the *Thirukkural*, which was first published in print by Francis Whyte Ellis, in 1831. The print history and subsequent commentaries of *Kural* opened up a vociferous public debate over literary historiography. Thass in his *Tamilian*, from June 1908 up till his

death in 1914, continuously published articles on the *Kural* by retrieving material, interpreting the verses, giving references, deriving etymological meanings, introducing new texts, commentaries and figures, so as to recover *Kural* and Valluvar from the caste biography that was published in its print history.

In this attempt, Thass countered and discussed the biographical details of Valluvar and argued a case for his retrieval. Thass cross-referenced verses from texts such as *Munkalaitivagaram*, *Pinkalai Nigandu*, *Manimekalai*, *Sivagasindhamani* and *Sulamani* among others, to explain and construct an alternative reading of the given caste history. For instance, he rejected the title *Thirukkural* (The Holy Voice: *Thiru* + *Kural*; *Thiru* is an honorific affix which may mean divine). Instead he gave a Buddhist interpretation to the *Kural*. He explained it as *Thiri Kural*, where *thiri* means three *pitakas* of the Dhamma doctrine, namely: of ethics (*Arathupal*), material (*Porutpal*), and love (*Kamathupal*). *Kural* is hence divided into three parts called *Muppal*. This explanation gives an opportunity to Thass to demonstrate with resources the Buddhist origins of Valluvar, the author of the *Kural*. Thass was apparently waging an intellectual battle single-handedly with the Saivaite pundits of his time, over their claims on Valluvar as well as Auvaiyar. Thus, through poetic references and quotations, Thass literally wove an intellectual project of retrieval, contestation, re-reading and imagining an anti-caste (political) legacy (tradition) through journalistic prose.

For instance, he did not accept the socio-anthropological constitution and description of the word *pariahs*: that they were meek and weak, that they were untouchable, poor and socially ostracised were narratives scientifically premised on descriptive accuracy and evidential historicity. These were, for Thass, to be rejected in order to be reinvented. In his writings, *pariah* as a concept is to be derived and reconstituted so as to nullify the available category. Hence he worked with the word and interpreted it imaginatively. He argued that the word *paraiyar* is a derivative of the word *piraiyar* or *pirar* (i.e. others). He argued, through references, that they were 'others', the original Buddhists, i.e. *purva bouddhargal* (*purvam* means original as well as holistic), who did not accept the brahminical caste differences and therefore were condemned by *vesha brammanas* (deceptive Brahmins) as untouchables. Through speculative etymology he created a community imaginary of resistance.

Thass becomes the sole mediator, an author/ity of a textual practice that was being transferred into anti-caste print cultures. As a subaltern intellectual, he sought to alter knowledge practice by using journalism as a tool to gain inroads into the print public sphere. He corroborated this with the idea that a sovereign nation does not only emerge but gets contested tooth and nail, first in the language zone through print journals – not only against the colonial powers, but also against hegemonic caste nations within a language zone.

The fact that an anti-caste, intellectual use of journalistic print was practised by scholars such as Iyothee Thass is an important example of a legacy; but sadly, it is also a historical 'event of erasure'. Their prolific participation imprinted their erasure in history. They are precariously absent in the visible, legible historiographies of today. These historical moments have to be recovered so as to bring to light a resistant pre-history to the question of Dalit absence in journalism, intellectual practice and the public sphere today.

### Conclusion

Thass's exercises with thought, imagination and conceptualisation to create an alterity is closely linked with the idea of a 'political community' in practice emerging from the subaltern constituency, with their own resources, in the early twentieth century. Thass reversed the gaze on caste society from the point of view of the outcastes as a Buddhist: *pirar*, i.e. the other. He did not concede Sanskrit as the language of the Brahmins/Aryans and Tamil as the language of the Dravidian stock, as Caldwell and other oriental philologists had argued. For him, both Sanskrit and Tamil are sister languages of Buddhist origin with Pali as their common source. He used all these languages profusely to create a Buddhist history of India, while not collaborating with the 'British discovery'. He just used the available myths, history, folk-narratives and literature in Tamil. His effort to read history from within the reserves of the Tamil language available to the marginalised community not only strengthened their agency, but also opened new ways to interpret and understand 'culture' beyond caste and as part of a collective community of experience. As someone who organised his community in the name of *sathi betha matra dravida mahajana sabha* (casteless dravida mahajana sabha), he gave content to the idea of castelessness, Buddhism and Tamil community. *Tamizhan* was perhaps always one step inside resistant tradition, but sadly remained two steps outside the institutional boundaries of history that emerged in India.

The Tamil Dalits used print journals to create an anti-caste community imaginary in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They not only rejected the nationalism propounded by the predominantly upper-caste public sphere of print, but also laid out an alternative knowledge practice. This prioritised the oral traditions present among the oppressed communities. In Thass, journalistic print was used intellectually to retrieve, contest, re-read and re-evaluate an anti-caste legacy. In short, his search for an anti-caste descent fundamentally transformed what was previously considered immobile and static. Dalits, hence, profusely use social media and internet as an alternative technological tool in their fight against caste today; against the media giants who structure the globalised regime of power that does not voice the violence of caste loudly.

Hence, the clarion call of 'one step outside modernity', for those who

were abused by Hindu tradition as outcastes, should be a claim for a legacy of caste-free cosmology; a cultural attempt that retrieves a 'genealogy of loss' of an ingenious kind, like Iyothée Thass's project. It is then a resurgence of the earlier suppressed traditions of a culture in a new context; a creative yet critical position that recuperates an anti-caste tradition for their own emancipation from different sources, particularly those modernities from the past which annihilate caste. It does not eulogise or censor without differentiating between the actual and the conceptual. This is perhaps the way forward to expose the 'Dalit' category to its outside, and to its other, so that anyone can ex-casteise themselves. Not just to step outside or inside, but to take multiple steps backward and forward; toward ruptures that open a legacy that does not erase its own steps.

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#### Notes

- 1 Koppula Nagaraju, a budding journalist and a Dalit activist from Hyderabad, who worked in *Indian Express*, passed away in April 2015 due to lack of institutional support for his cancer ailment. A discussion on the lack of supportive structures for Dalits and caste discrimination in media spaces became a national debate (Sheth, 2015; Devbarman, 2015; Seetaramulu, 2015; Trivedi, 2015). This prompted many to articulate questions of caste in premier English media spaces. Questions about food and social cultures were openly discussed. English media houses in India were branded brahminical and casteist. In a three-part investigative report titled 'The untold story of Dalit journalists', senior journalist Ajaz Ashraf explained in *The Hoot*, a media monitoring website, the reasons for the poor participation of Dalits in media and their low presence as journalists in India. He also referred to an earlier article written by journalist B.N. Uniyal, in 1996, titled 'In search of a Dalit journalist', where Uniyal's 'none' as an answer triggered him to start this investigation right from the Indian Institute of Mass Communications, arguably among the best media institutes in the country. Ajaz interviewed 23 Dalit journalists so as to give a picture about their presence in the Indian mediascape. His investigation was not just to study how the media is imagined by the Dalit respondents vis-à-vis the community's aspirations, while experiencing discrimination in all walks of life. He also made it a heterogeneous collective of voices on the mediascape as a spatial imaginary to be used for the welfare of the oppressed community. See, <http://thehoot.org/web/TheuntoldstoryofDalitjournalists/6956-1-1-19-true.html>.
- 2 See, M.S.S. Pandian (2002).
- 3 See, Sanal Mohan (2015); Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai (2012).
- 4 See, Lanternari (1964).
- 5 See T. Dharmaraj (2010).
- 6 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. While 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, Dharmaraj also points out that the marginalised 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. This 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 recognise, Dharmaraj 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 marginalised as a whole, Pandian inappropriately relegated him as a *Paraiyar* Buddhist.

7 See, Gajendran Ayyathurai (2014).

8 See K. Velmangai and L. Selvamuthu Kumarasami (2012): 2.

9 The magazine *Dravida Pandian*, started by Rev. John Rathinam and Pandit Iyothee Thass, was the first magazine to use the term *Dravidian*.

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