

‘Oru Paisa Tamizhan’ and the Dravidian Buddhist Identity of Pandit Iyothee Thass

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Abstract

Oru Paisa Tamizhan and the Dravidian Buddhist identity of Pandit Iyothee Thass. The socio-political landscape of the 20th century Tamilnadu witnessed a plethora of mass movements that altered the hitherto status quo and its discourse. Many disadvantaged and marginalised masses across the world strategically organised, interacted, and rebelled against the dominant groups through various methods. The Dravidian movements in particular, harmoniously blended social activism and literature which constructed a new Tamil-Dravidian identity. Pandit Iyothee Thass, an anti-caste activist who revived Buddhism in the Tamil land must be credited as a pioneer to the entire social reformation project of the Dravidian movements. With the weekly Oru Paisa Tamizhan, which he owned, edited and published carried articles, letters, memoranda, circulars that focused on the socio-cultural emancipation of the Dalits. The four-page weekly was circulated every Wednesday and it pioneered the entire social reformation project of the Dravidian Movements. With the dream of constructing a casteless society, Thass continued to re-interpret history, religion and literature of the Tamils from a Buddhist perspective. In this new light of Buddhism, he managed to found an intricate nexus between the fall of Buddhism and the rise of Brahminism. To him, Buddhism did not emerge as a resistance against the Vedic religion; rather, he complained that only the Vedic intrusion spoiled and devoured Buddhism. The paper attempts to study how the periodical has developed a novel discourse, to counter the evils of caste narratives, in which Buddhists, casteless Dravidians, and original Tamils were all one and the same.

Keywords: Caste, Tamil Buddhism, Iyothee Thass, Tamil Periodical Literature.

The literary contributions of Iyothee Thass Pandithar (1845-1914), a traditional Siddha practitioner and an ardent Buddhist, to the revival of Buddhism in Tamil land have not been much discussed until the 1990s. The writings of Raj Gowthaman, D.Dharmaraj, G.Aloysius, D.Ravikuar and Stalin Rajangam brought Thass back into the socio-political and literary scene and revived him as a pioneer of the Dalit Movements. Particularly, after 2000, he has become a cultural icon and a political symbol representing the Dalits in public space. He is being studied and researched in different contexts and from various perspectives which stress his undeniable contribution to the Dalit cause. This paper focuses on the role of literary articulation by Iyothee Thass, particularly through the weekly *Oru Paisa Tamizhan*, which pioneered the entire social reformation project of the Dravidian Movements, in constructing a Dravidian Buddhist identity for the ‘Poorva Tamils’.

Oru Paisa Tamizhan – The Origin of a Dravidian Buddhist Thought

The journey of the weekly “*Oru Paisa Tamizhan*” (1907) that carried articles, letters, memoranda, and circulars focusing on the socio-cultural emancipation of the Dalits can be studied in two different phases. During the first phase (1907-1914) the magazine came out every Wednesday under the editorship of Thass and its primary objective was to restore the glory of Tamil-Buddhist society. The Buddhist Press, The Gautama Press and The Siddhartha Printing Press played a crucial role in the publication and circulation of the journal in this phase. To re-construct the Tamil Buddhist past, Thass embraced local legends, myths and narratives into account along with the already written historical tracts to provide a re-interpretation of the Tamil past with a harmonious blend of history and fiction. This localization of the Buddhist religion by tracing its inherent connection with the Tamil society and culture is one of the prominent discourses he created to revive Buddhism in the Tamil land.

The second phase (1926-1934), i.e. after the death of Iyothee Thass, G.Appaduraiyar and A.P.Periyasami Pulavar took over the responsibility of *Tamizhan* and there was a significant change in the objective of the journal. The new editors moved from reconstructing the past to repairing the present, influenced by the Self-Respect Movement. It is very important to mention that Thass has never subscribed to the rival positions of Tamil and Sanskrit; he neither had a staunch pride in Tamil nor an aversion towards Sanskrit. He even considered that Tamil had evolved from Pali, the language in which Buddha spoke. Masilamani, an important contributor to *Tamizhan*, is proximal to Periyar in his articulations about Aryan resistance and women's emancipation. On one hand, he attacked Brahmins for their passive colonisation and, on the other hand, he demanded women empowerment. His writings stand as testimony to the paradigm shift in the Buddhist Movement that happened after the death of Thass and anticipated the radical ideas of the Self-Respect Movement. For instance, unlike Thass, Masilamani considered women "wilfully subjugated" to conform to patriarchal society and registered his criticism of religion. It can be said that the popularity of the Self-Respect Movement initiated by Periyar has devoured the Buddhist discourses within the framework of his Dravidian ideology.

Iyothee Thass and the Revival of Buddhism

The Oriental scholars like Eugene Burnouf, T.Rhys Davids, Carolyn Rhy Davids initiated studies on Buddhism and translated some of the Pali Buddhist works into English, which opened a whole new paradigm of study. For Thass, it was Henry Steele Olcott from the Theosophical Society and Anagarika Dharmapala from Sri Lanka, the twin inspirations who turned him towards Buddhism. The Kolkata Maha Bodhi Society was founded by Dharmapala in 1891 and the visit to Sri Lanka accompanied by Olcott served as catalysts for Thass' ardent faith in Buddhism to emancipate the "Poorva Tamils".

Thass' acquaintance with Rev. John Ratnam, in initiating the *Dravida Pandian* magazine, had inspired him to publish his own magazine. In 1907, *Oru Paisa Tamizhan* appeared as a weekly that was circulated every Wednesday. The journal had twin central mottos of promoting Buddhism among the 'Adi-Tamils' on one hand

and condemning the cruel practice of caste on the other. Along with it, Thass attempted to propagate a unique Dravidian Buddhist consciousness among the original inhabitants of the land, i.e., the "Adi Dravidas", whom he called "Adi-Tamils", "Poorva Tamils". According to him, they were the original Buddhists who were subjugated and sidelined to the margins after the advent of brutal systems of caste unleashed by the Vedic religion. Each and every section of the journal were contributed to the above mentioned causes and all the important contributors during the first phase, such as Periyasami Pulavar, TC Narayana Pillai, Swapneshwari Ammal and C.M.E.Moorthy added to the cause with their emancipatory writings. *Tamizhan* had four pages in total during its initial days and carried different sections that aimed to awaken the Tamil society from its socio-cultural and historical slumber. "Poorva Tamil Oli", "Varuthamanam", "Thanthi Samacharangal" and "Gnana Prakasa Sudar" were some sections which concentrated on the reconstruction of the Tamil past with a Dravidian Buddhist narrative, also on the engagement with the local and global contemporary political happenings.

Iyothee Thass interpreted Tamil history, culture and tradition in a new light of Buddhism, which enabled them to challenge the prevalent Brahminism. He engaged himself in re-reading the cultural texts of the Tamil land for which he took local myths, legends, lore and other native discourses into account. For instance, he argued that the subcontinent was originally known as 'Indirar Desam', which later evolved as India. Nandan, who is depicted as an untouchable in the Hindu legends, was given a completely new and unheard story that he was the King of the Indira Desam. In another instance, he completely rejected the idea of Thiruvalluvar having an Aryan lineage by exposing the malpractices of Visakaperumal Iyer and Saravana Perumal Iyer, who had incorporated a false biography to Valluvar. He neglected the grand canonical Sangam literature which classified Tamil life into 'Agam' and 'Puram'. Rather, he considered the Buddhist and Jainist texts such as Manimekalai, Kundalakesi, Valayapathi, Veera Sozhiyam and the ethical works of Thiruvalluvar and Avvaiyar as the original Tamil canonical works. All these re-readings and reconstructions helped him to find Buddhist reminiscences in the Tamil religious

and cultural practices and to establish Aram (ethics and morals) as the central core of Tamil literature and society.

V.Geetha and S.V.Rajadurai argue that Thass has found an intricate nexus between the fall of Buddhism and the rise of Brahminism. However, Thass has never believed that Buddhism has declined. Rather, he argued that it was altered by Aryan intervention. He tried to explain a Buddhist version of almost many of the religious and cultural practices of the 'Poorva Tamils', which enabled him to construct a Tamil Dravidian Buddhism. The Sakya Buddhist Society of Thass served as a socio-cultural exercise in his writings in *Tamizhan*. Mentioning the importance of the Society, he writes that it is established "to explain the ancestral histories and Buddhist Dhamma to the casteless Dravidians and, through stability in virtue and religious discipline, to help them towards progress" (56). Through 'Poorva Tamil Oli', Thass continuously attacked the Aryans for polluting the Buddhist religion and their whole agenda with the introduction of a caste system in the Tamil land. He condemned the epistemological systems of the Aryans in one of his articles dated 28.10.1908 for having caste as its underlying structure and rejected them as useless. Another contributor, Masilamani, in the issue dated 05.08.1908 glorified the original Dravidian culture by remembering the forgotten past of the aboriginal 'Poorva Tamils' and engaging in a search for a lost history.

Interestingly, *Tamizhan* articulated its condemnations against the Hindu religion and its articulation to reconstruct the forgotten past came in a period where Hindu revivalism was deeply in action by the educated Aryans with the help of Theosophical Society. We can see constant journalistic clashes between *Tamizhan* and *Sudesimithran* where the latter stood for what the former had determined to abolish. This was completely on a religious basis and not on linguistic grounds. Thass strongly believed that Sanskrit and Tamil were sister languages and rejects its contradictory positions. In 1911, he argued that "the one who constructed the Tamil language was Sakkaya Munivar and those who promoted it were the Samana Munvars" (Aloysius 182). He even believed that Buddha preceded the Hindu religion in a time period and lived during a period when there were no caste-based hierarchies. This brings

us to the idea that Thass did not see Buddhism as a resistance against the Vedic religion. Rather, he complained that the Vedic intrusion spoiled and altered the Buddhist religion.

Though Thass concentrated mostly on the emancipation of the panchamas, we can infer that 'Poorva Tamils', as propagated by Thass, did not refer to the members of a particular caste but any Tamil speaker who embraced castelessness. It can be said that it is his aversion against caste that attracted him towards the ideology of Tamil Buddhism. A constant attack on the brutal caste system was ubiquitous in the writings of Thass. For instance, an issue dated on 07.01.1909 carried instances of caste restrictions on pariahs - they were not allowed to read, wear clean clothes, or even fetch water from Brahmin lakes. He believed that the pariahs and panchamas were the aboriginals of the land who had a Buddhist ethnic continuity in their cultural practices. Specifically, he believed that the valluva-sakya (sub-caste of the paraiahs) was the direct descendants of the Sakya clan of Buddha. G.Aloysius sums up the entire Dravidian Buddhist ideology of Thass by arguing that Buddhism, casteless Dravidians and original Tamils were interchangeable terms that he used in his writings to denote the same thing.

In a memorandum submitted to the Indian National Congress in 1831, Iyothee Thass demanded the Congressmen not to mention Adi-Dravidas as Hindus and argued that "there is no basis to call this community the pariahs... (which) causes deep hurt and actually degrades them". Instead, he proposed the identity of 'Poorva Tamils' or 'Adi Tamils' to the community as he believed that they are the real Buddhist inhabitants of the land. It is interesting to note that the first organisational resistance against the Brahmin hegemony emerged from an oppressed community which had Thass and his Dravidian Buddhist ideologies as its central thrust. His identification of the "brahminical core of Swadeshi ideology" of the Congress made him neglect the great wave of national movements. Instead, he concentrated on the emancipation of the 'Poorva Tamils'. In the issue dated 25.12.1907, he questioned the Congress "Was a paracheri a part of the motherland?" and demanded separate representations for his people in the modern bureaucratic and electoral

structures. It is possible to conclude that 'castelessness' and the pre-Brahminical Buddhist past were the twin motives of the *Tamizhan* under the editorship of Thass.

After the death of Thass, *Tamizhan* came under the leadership of his son Pattabiraman for a short tenure between 17.06.1914 and 26.08.1915. Once Pattabiraman moved away from the faith of Buddhism, *Tamizhan* suffered from lack of finance and leadership, which led to a rupture in the frequency of its publication and for 9 years the publication was curbed. The second and final phase of the magazine ranges from 07.07.1926 – 27.06.1934 where both G.Appaduraiyar and A.P.Periyasami Pulavar from the Kolar Gold Fields played an important role in the editorship and the circulation of the magazine. They were already popular among Buddhist circles for their books on Buddha and their authentic past. The important contributors during this period were M.V.Ponniah, C.K.Kuppusamy, Annapoorani Ammal and M.Ponnu.

It is important to mention that the 1930s saw the emergence of two secular voices – Dr.B.R.Ambedkar from the North and E.V.Ramasamy Periyar from the South. Periyar from Tamilnadu did not consider religion to be a unifying factor to emancipate the lower castes. Instead, he stressed the importance of self-respect and rationalism. This had a huge impact on the ideologies of *Tamizhan*, which started deviating from stressing the importance of Buddhism as liberation from caste brutality. G. Aloysius mentions that the post-Iyothee Thass period of *Tamizhan* did deviate from its Buddhist essence and started concentrating on the contemporary socio-political events of the land. Other journals like *Adi Dravida Mahavikathoothan*, *Boologavyasan*, *Parayan* and *Adi Dravdia Mithran* were in circulation during this period, which also supported the cause of *Adi Dravidas* but not how Thass envisioned it. From November 1932, considering his deteriorating health, G.Appadurair withdrew himself from being in-charge of the magazine. The subsequent deaths of the two Buddhist stalwarts, P.Lakshmi Narasu in 1934 and Anagarika Dharmapala in 1933 officially ended the publication of the magazine.

The Dravidian Buddhist identity as proposed by Thass and his fellow leaders became a public activity with the help of the magazine, but it was confined only to northern Madras. Its failure to create an organisational structure in the other parts of the Tamil land led to the inactiveness of the news journal and Buddhist articulations. However, as Thass argued in the case of Buddhism, the religio-cultural Tamil history constructed by *Tamizhan* continued to reverberate in the Dravidian Movements that later took the centre stage of Tamil politics and culture. The Self-Respecters under the guidance of Periyar considered Thass as a towering figure and took many of his pronouncements as their foundation of Samadharma. It needs to be mentioned that the first Self-Respect General Conference was held under the Buddhist Society in 1932. G. Aloysius praises the Tamil Buddhist movement propagated by Iyothee Thass for serving as "an ideological antecedent, organisation of programmatic partnership and a mass merger" which laid the foundations of Dalit emancipation in the Tamil land.

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