



## IYOTHEE THASS AND DEPRESSED CLASS INTELLECTUALS'S PRINT AND PRESS MEDIA IN LIBERATION STRUGGLE IN TAMIL NADU

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### Abstract:

*Iyothee Thass, a depressed class by birth and Buddhist by conviction, was an outstanding figure in the role to emancipate the Depressed Classes and women in Tamil Nadu. He initiated socio-cultural awakening which preceded the specular rise of the Dravidian Movement in the second decade of the Twentieth Century Tamil Nadu. An Ideologue and a cultural crusader, Iyothee Thass and a host of Depressed Class intellectuals of Tamil Nadu initiated a dozen of Tamil journals and magazines and ventilated novel ideas and their print and press activities opened a new ground in the subaltern struggle for identity, human dignity, equality, justice and above all social emancipation. Iyothee Thass and R.Srinivasan who started the journals, Tamilan and Parayan respectively heralded the 'Age of Struggle for Social Justice and Social Acceptance' in Tamil Nadu. Iyothee Thass also spearheaded a campaign of press media for the liberation of women from the age old suppositious customs of the Hindu Society. He ran the popular Tamil Weekly, Tamilan, for years. Besides, he published scores of pamphlets and tracts by him and his associates which were widely circulated among Tamils everywhere. The articles and write-ups he contributed for Tamilan provide an idea of the astounding range of his concerns: caste hegemony, untouchability and issues involved in census which are considered still great obstacles for the emancipation of Depressed classes and women.*

### KEYWORDS:

Depressed Classes, untouchability, census, emancipation, sanskritization.

### INTRODUCTION

Tamil press is typical of the rest of the Indian press in that it is a plant of recent growth. The earliest surviving printing in Tamil was a 16-page tract called, "Christian Doctrine". It was published by Portuguese Priests in Quilon on the Malabar Coast in 1578. The first Tamil periodical known as the Tamil Magazine was produced by the Christian Religious Tract Society in 1831. The other earliest Tamil weekly Rajavaritha Bodhini was published in 1833, and Dina Varthamani was the earliest Tamil newspaper published from Madras in 1856.<sup>1</sup> The first Tamil Newspaper, Swadesamitran, was started by G.Subramania Iyer in 1882. Then many Tamil publications came into being

During the Governor-Generalship of Lord Lytton, the Vernacular Press Act was passed in 1878. It was also known as the 'Gagging Act'. By that, each printer and publisher had to deposit security and enter into a bond binding them not to print any matter against the British and submit proofs to the official censors. Lord Ripon, his successor repealed the Act in 1882. The Partition of Bengal of 1905 accelerated the spirit of

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the nationalist press to denounce the British Government in all possible ways. Again, in order to restrain the Press, the Newspaper (Incitement of Offences) Act 1908 was introduced. It empowered a magistrate to take away a press if it published matter that could ignite the public. This Act was powerful enough. In spite of this, the India Press Act 1910 was implemented. Accordingly, every press was required to deposit a security amount which would be forfeited if any matter printed was considered seditious. A second offence entailed not only the forfeiture of the security amount but also the press.<sup>2</sup> This Act was finally repealed in 1922.

### DEPRESSED CLASSES

In the Indian context, the 'Scheduled Castes' of today are the 'Depressed Classes' of yester years. The term 'Depressed Classes' began to be used in official circle in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. These Depressed Classes shared certain common features of discrimination, degradation and exploitation due to contemptuous treatment they suffered at the hands of caste-Hindus for over long years. 'Untouchability' and 'segregation' were the two essential attributes of this class people. According to B.R. Ambedkar, by the fourth century A.D., the untouchability, an abominable social stigma got institutionalized and the 'hatred people' were treated as belonging to 'fifth varna'.<sup>3</sup>

The expression of 'Depressed Classes' is made up of two words 'Depressed' and 'Classes'. The former is the adjective form of verb 'Depressed' which means to press down and later is the plural of classes which connotes "One wide group of people who have common way of life and have political or economic similarity and equal social status and similar interests." Thus in the ordinary parlance the Depressed Classes should mean a group of people pressed down.<sup>4</sup> The untouchables were called Depressed Classes.<sup>5</sup> The term Depressed Classes is used to describe the lowest in the Hindu caste system,<sup>6</sup> which were suppressed by the caste-Hindus through the ages. Romans had their slaves, Spartans their helots, British their villains, Americans their Negroes, Germans their Jews and Indians their Depressed people who were considered as low classes. They were considered below the Sudras who formed the lowest social order in varna system.<sup>8</sup> In the Puranas they were called, aaprusyas, avarnas, chandalas. Svapachas, antyajas, jabawans, varishals, antyawasi, antya and bhang.<sup>9</sup>

### JOURNALS OF DEPRESSED CLASSES

During this critical period, a dozen of Tamil journals were published by the Depressed Class intellectuals in Tamil Nadu. The most notable among these journals are Suriyodayam (Sun Rise) (1869), Panchama (The Outcaste) (1871), Sugirdavasani (1877), Dravidapandian (later Dravidan) (1885) Dravidamitran (1885), Anror Mitran (1886), Mahavikatatoothan (1888), Paraiyan (1893), Illara Ozhukkam (1898), Puloga Vyasani (1900), Dravida Kokilam (1907) and Tamilan (1907) and Tamil Pen (Tamil Woman).<sup>10</sup> In the columns of these journals, Dalits intellectuals like C.Iyothee Thass, A.P.Periyasamy Pulavar, T.C.Narayanaswamy Pillai, T.I.Swamikannu Pulavar, Pandit Munisamy, Rettamalai Srinivasan, John Rathinam, Muthuvira Pavalar, .K.Swappaneswari Ammal and several others vehemently criticized casteism, brahmanism, manudharma, Kalpa Sutra, etc., They also took up their cudgel of attacks against social evils that were rampant in the Hindu Society. They stood for the liberation of the women and Depressed Classes from the tradition bound Hindu Society.<sup>11</sup>

### BRITISH RULE- AN AGE OF EQUALITY

The British repressive legal measures did not much affect the Depressed Classes. The Depressed Class Leaders considered the necessity of the British Rule for liberation of their people in all spheres. The British Rule heralded an 'Age of Equality', because the people who were oppressed for centuries due to the practice of untouchability and the rigid caste system began to feel the breath of freedom. Hence, due to the historical necessity, the activities of Depressed Class intellectuals were mostly pro-British. Even B.R. Ambedkar was considered as "the most pro-British Indian".<sup>12</sup> A seven-member Dalit jury editing a supplement for The Pioneer on The Dalit Millennium ranked the arrival of Vasco Da Gama as the turning point in Indian history, for it was his discovery of the sea route that activated the arrival of the ideas of democracy, equality, rule of law. A new vision and a new worldview emerged which was against the established society.<sup>13</sup>

The western education was denied to the Depressed Class people. It was because of religious sanction. But the availability of the print medium helped in awakening the Depressed Classes. The Tamizhan weekly of Pandit C. Iyothee Thass was used as an instrument to protest against caste

discrimination, propagate Buddhist ideology and to reclaim the original identity of the Depressed Classes.

#### ADVAIDANANDA SABHA

Born on May 20, 1845 to Kandasamy in Coimbatore district, C.Iyothee Thass's surname was Kathavarayan and he adopted the name of his teacher Iyothee Thass. He grew up in the Nilgiris and later settled in Madras. He was a native physician of repute in Siddha medicine.<sup>14</sup> It is known that one of his grandfathers was a butler of Lord Arlington.<sup>15</sup> He became a popular leader of people in Northern Tamil Nadu. At the age of twenty-five, he established 'Advaidananda Sabha'. The objectives of the Sabha were two fold. One was the prevention of the proselytizing activities of the Christian missionaries. The second was to find out the emancipatory potentials of the Advaitic tradition in undermining varna/caste discriminations.<sup>16</sup> His link with Hinduism was ended with his youth age. His involvement with the problems and the situation of the Depressed Classes led him to refute the imposed identity of Hinduism. In 1881, he sought to intervene in the census process and demanded that the aboriginal and 'outcaste' communities be recorded as 'original Tamils' and this was followed by a declaration in 1886 that the original inhabitants of this area were not Hindus.<sup>17</sup> He urged 'the so-called untouchables to register themselves as casteless Dravidians in the very first census makes Tamil Dalits the true descendents of the anti-Brahmin legacy.'<sup>18</sup> The Dravidar Kazhagam<sup>19</sup> was founded by Rev. John Ratnam of the Wesleyan Mission as early as 1886. Iyothee Thass was associated with him in brining out a newsmagazine called the Dravida Pandian.<sup>20</sup>

#### DRAVIDA MAHAJANA SABHA

The Dravida Mahajana Sabha<sup>21</sup> was formed in 1891 under the leadership of Iyothee Thass at Ooty on 1st December 1891. Ten resolutions were passed demanding civic rights, educational concessions, removable of certain objectionable rules in jail manual, economic advancement of the Depressed Classes, due share in appointment in government services including that of village offices.<sup>22</sup> On the conclusion of the first state level Conference, he sent a copy of the resolutions to the Congress Party. Here merely received an acknowledgement, but no subsequent action was taken.<sup>23</sup> Annoyed by this, he remarked that the Indian National Congress was only a Bengali Brahmin Congress. His hostility towards the Congress made him anticipate and predict the self fulfilling prophecy that "just like the caste system split to form the 1008 graded castes, the Congress would also split."<sup>24</sup> He became a highly Dalit activist and led the his people to the path of progress. He started the Oru Paisa Tamilan magazine in June 1907 and was renamed Tamilan on 26 August 1908 and it ran as weekly continuously till his death in 1914.<sup>25</sup>

#### ANTI-ARYAN DISCOURSE

Iyothee Thass was much connected with the anti-Aryan discourse of the Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu, His discourse was recognized by a host of scholars.<sup>26</sup> Bergunder viewed that Iyothee Thass belonged to a Paraiyar elite which in the early years of the Raj and achieved a certain degree of social advancement in different ways, be it as soldiers, as employees in medical services, as house-servants to Europeans, as employees in Christian missions, as mine workers etc. The increasing brahmanization of colonial society at the end of the Nineteenth Century began to restrict such opportunities for social advancement and thereby counteracted the interests of this small Paraiyar middle class.<sup>27</sup> Amidst tumultuous situation where the Paraiyar Society faced its greatest threats from caste-Hindu forces in culturally degrading Paraiyars, the Tamil Buddhist movement of Iyothee Thass came to flourish, and his magazine Tamilan grew from strength to strength. In fact, ethnic identities tended to attain their greatest importance in situations of flux, change, resource competition and threats against boundaries. Ericksen views that consequently that political movements based on cultural identity are strong in societies undergoing modernization, although this does not account for the fact that these movements become nationalist movements.<sup>28</sup> He adds, "Ethnic symbolism referring to the ancient language, religion, kinship system or way of life is crucial for the maintenance of ethnic identity through periods of change. Generally speaking, social identity becomes most important the moment it seems threatened."<sup>29</sup>

The British Power imparted education and literacy to the Paraiyars. Practicing suffocating forms of untouchability, the caste-Hindus, especially the Brahmins thoroughly denied education to the Dalits. People followed the professions of their forefathers, and the only known system of schooling that was opened only to the Brahmins was the Gurukula System. However, the coming of the British brought with it a host of educational institutions, mostly schools. Being from another country, and lacking a caste consciousness, their program of imparting an English education empowered the oppressed. As Eriksen

views, "Standardized mass education can therefore be an extremely powerful machine for the creation of abstract identifications. Literacy enables people to create 'authorized' versions of their history, and in view of the 'objective' status granted written accounts of history in most literate societies, the manipulation, selection or reinterpretation of history for political or other purposes becomes an important activity in the creation and re-creation of ethnic allegiances".<sup>30</sup> "The form of cultural reflexivity engendered by literacy may be a decisive variable in the ethnic revitalization of indigenous peoples. Since 'culture as a thing' is important in ethno-political symbolism, and since it can most effectively be turned into a thing through writing, we can assume that minorities confronted with capitalism and the state stand a better chance of surviving as culture-bearing groups than illiterate groups. Groups which have 'discovered that they have a culture', who have invented and reified their culture, can draw on myths of origin and a wide array of potential boundary-markers that are unavailable to illiterate minorities."<sup>31</sup>

### CULTURAL RENAISSANCE OF DEPRESSED CLASSES

Literacy paved the way for a cultural renaissance among the Paraiyars (Depressed Classes). They organized them like the Paraiyar Maha.jana Sabha and the Adi- Dravida Mahajana Sabha and in a host of activist magazines that were published. Like the early nineteenth century saying of Bishop Wilson, "The number of those who needed to be awakened was far greater than that of those who needed comfort." They accorded importance to the publication of journals and pamphlets (propaganda), seeking Clauses 18 and 19 of the Rules and Regulations of the All India Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha. The clause 18 states that all donations and subscriptions received by the Sabha shall vest in the Executive Committee. The Clause 19 views that the monies thus realized may be devoted to the following among other purposes: 1. to maintain and subsidize journals 2. to publish books and pamphlet on political, social, scientific, economical and literary subjects. 3. to organize and hold public meetings. 4. to start and maintain libraries and free reading rooms.

Subsequently, great importance was given to expose their indigenous, aboriginal identity. As Worsley remarks, "Cultural traits are not absolutes or simply intellectual categories, but are invoked to provide identities which legitimize claims to rights".<sup>32</sup> The creation of a larger and inclusive Tamil identity for the oppressed people, an identity towards castelessness is something that has happened on account of two reasons: one, their identity is perceived as being threatened, because Sanskritization and Aryan influence at the time was overwhelmingly powerful. The 'second reason' for the construction of identity was an attempt to create an organizational tool in a political struggle. The question of castelessness-a utopia formed out of the annihilation of castes -could be made possible only by the replacement of one identity (caste) with another (language). Caste and language are entirely dissimilar, because while caste is a system of graded hierarchies, language was egalitarian and anti-hierarchic. The structuring of such an identity was made feasible through the weekly magazine sold at just a paise (one hundredth of a rupee), the Oru Paisa Tamilan.<sup>33</sup>

### ORU PAISA TAMILAN FOR MULTI-PURPOSE

The very first issue of Oru Paisa Tamilan (19 June 1907) begins with an invocation to God, the Government, Tamil, the nation, foreign countries and the English and Dravidian newspapers (including the Standard, Times, Hindu, Indian Patriot, Uberal, Swadesamitran, Vikatan, Nalindhiya, Andhra Prakasika, Poologa Vyasana and Tamil Madhu). In a beautiful couplet, he expresses the emotional and social importance that could be attached to the magazine: he who knows the worth of the Oru Paisa Tamilan will value it as one crore (10 million) gold coins.<sup>33</sup> From 26 August 1908, it was published under the name, Tamilan.

Apart from his preoccupation with the rediscovery of the original Tamil-Buddhist identity, his other concerns are varied and included the problems of the Indians in South Africa,<sup>34</sup> caste system among the Catholic Christians<sup>35</sup>, the problems of agriculture in the Madras Presidency<sup>36</sup>, appointment of magistrates and district collectors, the working of the Dravida Mahajana Sabha, the absence of representatives in the Legislative Assembly to redress the grievances of the poor<sup>37</sup> and so on.

He was also responsible for initiating a script reform in the Tamil language. For that he cited evidence from ancient inscriptions and palm-leaf manuscripts. He put his ideas to practical use by making use of the reformed script in his own newspaper.



## WOMEN LIBERATION

His newspaper was also used to further the cause of women and to expose the sufferings they underwent in Hinduism. He blamed the system of child marriage, the disparity in the treatment meted out to men and women, the taboos of widowhood (like the compulsory tonsure of hair, white clothes, denial of a pillow to rest her head on), the problems faced by the married women, remarriage etc.<sup>38</sup> In an essay, 'The desires of Indian men and the difficulties of women', Iyothee Thass wrote thus : "It is an ideology of present-day Hindus that men can fulfill all their desires, but only women should undergo suffering." He further added thus : "while a man can marry 100 wives even when his wife is alive, a woman cannot remarry even when her husband is dead."<sup>39</sup> In condemning the plight of women, he knocked out at the root of caste-Hindu patriarchy. The highest percentage of his censure is directed at the caste-Hindu newspapers.

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- 34.Tamilan dated 19 June 1907.
- 35.Incidentally, Iyothee Thass's son Rajaram Thass was instrumental for the spread of Buddhism among the Tamils in South Africa.
- 36.Tamilan dated 18 January 1910. Iyothee Thass systematically mounted attacks on the caste ism prevalent in Christianity. It is unfortunate that the Tamil Christian magazines of the day such as Nallayan and Thiru Idhaya Thoothan liberally acknowledged and perpetrated caste within Christianity.
- 37.Ibid., dated 20 March 1912.
- 38.He also specifically devoted to the problems faced by women. Ibid., dated 16 December 1908; 15 February 1911; 3 July 1912; and 11 December 1912.
- 39.His ecological concerns probably stem from his expertise as a native physician. He advocated in the early 20th century the need for "growing a tree in every home"-an idea that the State actively began to propagate only recently after decades of unchecked deforestation and mass urbanization.
- 40.Tamilan dated 24 July 1912.