

Foundations of Anti-caste Consciousness: Pandit Iyothee Thass, Tamil Buddhism, and  
the Marginalized in South India

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## Abstract

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This dissertation is about an anti-caste movement among Dalits (the oppressed as untouchable) in South India, the Parayar. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, members of this caste, and a few others from Tamil-speaking areas, have been choosing to convert to Buddhism based on conscience and conviction. This phenomenon of religious conversion-social transformation is this study's focus. By combining archival research of Parayar's writings among Tamil Buddhists, as these Parayar, settled in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, are called, I have attempted to understand this movement ethno-historically. In pre-colonial times, though the sub-continent's societies were hierarchical, the hierarchies were fluid and varied: i.e., the high-low or self-other dichotomies were neither fixed nor based on a single principle. The most significant effect of the encounter of British Colonialism and India was to precipitate an unprecedented master-dichotomy of singular and absolute form of self and other, as colonizer and the colonized. This had three consequences. (a) India was itself seen as singular and served as the Self to the colonial Other in an absolute dichotomy; (b) the role of essentializing the Indian Self was assumed by the brahmin; (c) this in turn resulted in an internal dichotomy between the—brahmin—essential self and the—non-brahmin—non-essential other. The means chosen to fix this dichotomy was to nominate the non-essential other's paradigmatic representation, the Dalit. I intend to read against the grain of the binary logic that was inaugurated at the moment of the colonial encounter by means of Tamil Buddhists' *oppositional*, *reconstructional*, and *representational* discursive practices.

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Note: For readability Tamil words have been transliterated, in lieu of diacritics.

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## Introduction

The problem of caste has undergone many mutations since precolonial times and promises to be a challenge in the foreseeable future. The question that animates this study is whether a comprehensive scholarly understanding exists about the efforts and social movements that have attempted immediate amelioration from caste as well as specific and general theorization for its annihilation, especially from that of the marginalized. As this study will argue, the answer can only be partially in the affirmative despite the increasing scholarship that addresses caste and its marginalized, such as Dalits. Recent scholarly studies have come to unveil the history of Dalits in a variety of ways. There are those that speak about their obeisance to the brahminical power<sup>1</sup> as well as those of religious studies that speak about their break with caste Hinduism<sup>2</sup> and their take on Christianity.<sup>3</sup> Some studies examine Dalit labor struggles and history.<sup>4</sup> Significantly, studies about Dalit street workers and Dalit slums have attracted the attention of scholars.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Moffatt, *Untouchable Community in South India: Structure and Consensus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Owen Lynch, *Politics of Untouchability: Social Mobility and Social Change in a City in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969); Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement Against Untouchability in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Saurabh Dube, *Untouchable Pasts: Religion, Identity, and Power among a Central Indian Community 1780-1950* (Albany: State University of New York, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Chandra Mallampalli, *Christians and Public Life in Colonial South India, 1863-1937: Contending with Marginality* (London; New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004); Rupa Viswanath, “‘The Pariah Problem’: Missionaries, the Administration of the ‘Untouchables’ and the Elaboration of Neutrality in Colonial South India, 1885-1918” (PhD Diss., Columbia University, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Gunnel Cederlof, *Bonds Last: Subordination, Conflict and Mobilization in Rural South India, 1900-1970* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Nathaniel. P. Roberts, “The Power of Conversion and the Foreignness of Belonging: Domination and Moral Community in a Paraiyar Slum” (PhD diss., Columbia University Press, 2008); Vijay

Above all theorizing Ambedkarian thought and movements have assumed greater importance now.<sup>6</sup> Arguably Dalit Studies has come to occupy a noticeable position in the Indian and the Western academy. The most oppressed of the Indian caste system, thus, could definitely look up to these studies for portraying their social-history in a different light than the manner in which it has been portrayed by colonial-brahmin and colonial-non-brahmin designs.

To be sure, the above studies have made contributions that are immensely valuable in that they have spread the awareness about the life of victims of the caste system, and crucially they attempt to unravel the complexity of the Dalit condition. Nevertheless, there is still a need to read the problem of caste and Dalits in a larger framework. That is, there is a compelling need to see the Dalit points of view beyond the studies that approach Dalit subject-construction through the lens of legal rights<sup>7</sup> (e.g., their “minority” status, their demands for civil and political rights, human rights violations they suffer from the upper castes and so on) and beyond the focus on their little traditions of cultural assertions that are ideologically subordinated to the Hinduism it is seen to mimic. We are yet to embark on studies, which unpack various Dalit positionalities that problematize the larger cultural, economic, and historical discursive and material contexts that give rise to the very problem of caste in the first place. What remains understudied, therefore, is *the Dalit criticism of Indian culture, economy, religions, and history* in general. Thus, even well-meaning studies that are highly sympathetic to Dalits persist in imagining rather than the assertions of the Dalit voices for liberation *in and from the margins*. In other words, the

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Prashad, *Untouchable Freedom: A Social History of Dalit Community* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Anupama Rao, *Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> For similar arguments see Rao, *Caste Question*.

question is whether there is scope to read Dalit criticism as displacing the brahminical position as well as non-brahmin upper caste positions and making them untenable at the center of an imagined Indian society, nation, civilization and history. This is not a call to focus on yet another oppositional discourse to caste from the margins, but to examine an immanent critique (i.e., from within the language, logics and logos of caste as it is sustained by discourse and practice) that flourished in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from emergent Dalit modernity and subjectivities that formed a counter-force to caste itself.

The methods of investigating the well-entrenched malady of caste by relentlessly recentering those who are oppressed as untouchables reveals less and less and conceals more and more, not for want of anti-caste Dalit actors in Indian history capable of disturbing the angle of repose that such studies have settled into as the grounds of their inquiry, but because of the hitherto absence or neglect of the means for listening to the ground that rubles with voices of discontent and difference. The fact remains that even though scholarship on the caste system—particularly the anthropology of caste—has by and large ignored the voices of the subalterns against caste or have tended to study elements of them in abstracted isolation, these voices have made their presence felt in Indian society through their philosophy, fictions, and histories that are intertwined and mediate their struggles to survive in everyday life. The traces of such movements of the marginalized, who are oppressed-by-caste, are the only guarantee that there are still possibilities for telling a story in their own terms.

What prevents us from such a project? While it is not feasible to exhaust all the reasons to figure out why a Dalit woman is not in a position to write her story as an upper caste woman writes her's today as she has in the past, some plausible explanations could be posited. One is able to discern at least two sets of factors since colonialism that have fundamentally shaped how

we see the Dalits, the most marginalized in the caste system in India. First, missionary and Orientalist conceptions of India and Indian societies in terms of caste, have only nurtured the continuation of such perceptions as “natural.” While it is clear that missionaries and Orientalists did not invent caste, their theories, conclusions and statistics were not merely to establish the dichotomy between the orient and the occident, but equally to interpret caste in a series of dichotomies.<sup>8</sup> One is compelled to ask the question whether the missionary campaigns and Orientalization of caste which led to making the Dalit as the Other of the brahmin could have been possible without the complicity of Indians in the valorization of caste as civilizational factor in the first place. However, the most notorious of all was to posit the Dalit and the brahmin as polar opposites. Assuming such a link between the missionaries and Orientalists, and upper castes, especially brahmins (however rudimentary they were before the codification of caste in colonial terms since the second half of the nineteenth century), one can posit some macro views about such linkages. It is only right that we discuss some instances of it in this introductory chapter since this sets up the backdrop for the rest of this study.

Among the European missionaries Abbe Dubois, arguably, made detailed observations about the Parayars more than any European in the late and early nineteenth century. In fact, he introduces them to the world elegantly,

owing to the depth of degradation in to which they have fallen, are looked upon as almost another race of beings, altogether outside the pale of society; and they are perfectly ready to acknowledge their own comparative inferiority. The best known and the most numerous of these castes is the *Parayer*, as it is called in Tamil, the word from which the European name Pariah is derived. The particulars which I am about to give of this class will form most striking contrasts with those I shall relate subsequently about the

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<sup>8</sup> Regarding the dichotomies (such as “*ghar* and *bahir*, the home and the world”) that circumscribed the gender problem within the Indian National Movement. See Partha Chatterjee, “The Nationalist resolution of the Women’s Question,” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 233-253.



Brahmins, and will serve to demonstrate a point to which I shall often refer, namely, how incapable the Hindus are of showing any moderation in their caste customs and observances. (*italics author*).

Having said this Dubois comes back to Parayars more profoundly,

The idea that he was born to be in subjection to the other castes is so ingrained in his mind that it never occurs to the Pariah to think that his fate is anything but irrevocable. Nothing will ever persuade him that men are all made of the same clay, or that he has the right to insist on better treatment than that which is meted out to him.<sup>9</sup>

To be sure, Dubois as a missionary committed to recruit Christians questions the caste system and the Hindus who subscribe to it as lacking in self-restraint. The problem with him is, as it is with many other later missionaries, that his arrogance to read the Parayars' mind as something that has volunteered to undergo dehumanization within the caste system and preferred to be half-human. Such a view is tantamount to parroting the brahminical notions of the brahmin and non-brahmin upper castes in general, and naturalizing subjugation of the most marginalized communities, such as Dalits, in particular. No wonder Dubois posits Parayars / Dalits as the Other of the upper caste selves, notably with the brahmins at the top, and not Sudra as the Other of the brahmin or upper castes as the Varnaashrama Dharma as well as the anthropological explications have come to portray.

One may assume that the brazen observations of the French Revolution escapee turned missionary in India i.e., Dubois, on the Parayars could have been the mark of a prejudiced missionary-scholar.<sup>10</sup> However, Max Muller who was professor at Oxford rescues him from

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<sup>9</sup> Abbe J. A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, trans. Henry K. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), 49-50.

<sup>10</sup> Max Muller writes about Dubois's arrival in India as a French revolution escapee. See his Introduction in Dubois 1906. Regarding the missionaries in South India Rupa Viswanath says "Missionaries, high- and low-level state agents (both Indian and British), and native elites, despite their otherwise often opposed interests, converged in defining the Pariah's ills in moral

such judgments, through his introduction of Dubois in the same book, “a man singularly free from prejudice and of a scholar with sufficient knowledge, if not of Sanskrit, yet of Tamil, both literary and spoken, to be able to enter in to the views of the natives...” and that Dubois was also, “a man remarkably free from theological prejudices, missionaries in particular will read his volume with interest and real advantage.”<sup>11</sup> This loaded prefatory note of Max Muller, in fact, compels one to examine Max Muller’s own ideas about the castes in India.

Of all the Orientalists, Max Muller, through his ethnological and philological interpretations, arguably has the unenviable position for single-handedly propping up brahmins and brahminism as the hallmark of the “Indian society” overriding all others that have lived and flourished in the sub-continent.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, what Muller, who never visited India, wrote, was to turn his early dismissal of the Indian as unsophisticated in comparison to the West into copious and extremely generous works on India that are fundamentally anchored in subtleties of brahminical superiority. This is demonstrably so once he was appointed as the professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University since 1851. It is important to note here that though the titles of some of his studies on India were general, and philologically important in nature such as *India: What can it teach us?* (1883); *Six Systems of Indian Philosophy* (1899); and *Sacred Books of the East* (1895), they are essentially celebrations of brahminical views of India and its histories. In

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and religious terms, and dividing caste itself into ‘primary’ religious elements and ‘secondary’ economic and political ones. Such understandings...would play a critical role in Hindu-leaning nationalism, which took up the ‘Harijan’ with particular eagerness in the 1920s and 30s— Gandhi’s efforts to affirm and revalue the place of the ‘Harijan’ *within* Hinduism could not, that is to say, have proceeded without the prior interpretation of the Pariah’s disabilities as *religious*.” See Viswanath, *Pariah Problem*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., vii.

<sup>12</sup> For a critical examination of Orientalists such as Max Muller and Colin Mackenzie see Nicholas. B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 38-39, 95-106.

fact, he was even deeply committed to the brahminical identity as he himself writes about a newspaper report about him: “While overflowing with pro-Aryan sympathies in his letters to Hindu correspondents, even to the extent of indulging a vain regret for his not having been born a Brahman...”<sup>13</sup> One can easily dismiss such instances as minor in comparison to his service for Sanskrit and “eastern spirituality.” However, the philosophical and sociological implications of his writings are profound, especially regarding the problem of caste. For instance, he says “Brahman with us is often used in two senses which should be kept distinct, meaning either member of the first caste, or one belonging to the three castes of the twice born Aryas, who are under the spiritual sway of the Brahmins.”<sup>14</sup> When the brahmin, as a caste, is presumed as something not to be interrogated for his inhumanity; instead a philosophical validity is mobilized, howsoever by maintaining a distinction between brahmin as person and brahmin as spirituality, either way the non-brahmin is sidelined. More importantly, that would also mean the inconsequential Other, Parayar, loses everything worthy of being human as Dubois said.

Preceding Max Muller was Colin Mackenzie, the first colonial surveyor general of India, who dedicated his life, till his death and burial in India, to compile the written works of Indians in the early nineteenth century. The crucial part of his collections was not just the handful of brahmin sibilings openly serving him as the informants of/for all Indians, but arguably the sanitization of what was collected through the brahminical prism. Though scholars have debated about the legacy of Mackenzie what we are yet to see is his impact on the problem of caste and the elevation of brahmins by conceding an uninterrogated social and intellectual authority and privilege to them. More importantly, an argument could be made that without Mackenzie’s

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<sup>13</sup> F. M. Max Muller, *India: What Can it Teach Us?* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2000), xxxi.

<sup>14</sup> F. M. Max Muller, *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1916), 17.

legitimization, brahmins could not have gained the power to mint themselves into modern privileged castes in order to peripheralize and erase the Pariah as the Other, and possibly censor their written works in ways that have numbed us to dismiss them with an exclamation, “can the Pariahs write? Know? Speak? about Indian history and society?”

Apart from examining the missionaries and Orientalists we also need to ask what colonial ethnographers, such as Thurston and Risley have done to the problem of caste, particularly in dichotomizing the Pariahs as against the brahmins?<sup>15</sup> While this work has only recently begun, it is not difficult to argue that they too are implicated in privileging the brahmins and deprivileging the Pariahs as the Other. This is not just manifested in the anthropometric studies that objectified Pariahs through measuring their noses and photographing their bodies. More importantly, it is how they have defined the “culture of the Pariahs” in opposition to the brahmins, in ways that serve a casteist view of history and society, especially enabling the brahmins to socio-cultural and religious prerogatives over all others at the cost of those who were consigned as the Pariahs.

It is equally relevant to ask the reaction of Indians to the missionaries and Orientalists and colonialists who constructed and codified what was essentially and energetically fed to them. That is the brahmins as the most superior caste and representing them—the brahmins—as the paramount agents of Indian culture and history while the others were steamrolled in a descending order of power and submission. One is further constrained to find even a single archival evidence of brahmins neither resisting the Orientalist classification of their “upper” status. Because it is the brahmins rather portrayed themselves as the chosen people of the Hindu gods to

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<sup>15</sup> Concerning the collusion between the colonialists and upper castes Rupa Viswanath says, “The mirasidars thus played to the ethnographic imagination of the colonial state using the very arguments that colonial officials themselves had pioneered. Both the state and Tanjore mirasidars had their own reasons to downplay the severity of Pariah servitude, and to exalt the genius of village economy.” See Viswanath, *Pariah Problem*, 250.

the Orientalists in the first place. Nor the brahmins were against the subhuman portrayal of the Pariah, or against the caste system in general, perhaps realizing how doing so would at once displace their power in religious and temporal realms. However, on the other hand, we have instances of those who corrected the Orientalists, such as Max Muller, for not seeing the Sanskrit brahmin legacy adequately, and for not situating the Aryans' home in the Arctic. For instance, Tilak says, "how the learned professor [Max Muller] saw, but narrowly missed grasping the truth having nothing else to guide him except the Dawn and the Vernal theory. He had perceived that Trita's hiding place was in the endless darkness and that the sun rose out of the same dark region; and from this to the Arctic theory [about the home of the Aryans] was but a small step."<sup>16</sup>

Moving from race, in fact, Tilak goes to caste directly, thereby resolving the distinction that Max Muller was making between brahmin caste and spirituality, when he (Tilak) says,

The whole of the Rig-Veda, any, the Veda and its nine supplementary books, have been preserved by the Brahmins of India, letter for letter and accent for accent, for the last 3000 or 4000 years at least; and priests have done so in recent times may well be credited with having fully preserved the traditions of the ancient home, until they were incorporated into the sacred books. ... But the service, which this class has rendered to the cause of ancient history and religion by preserving the oldest traditions of the race, is invaluable...<sup>17</sup>

While brahmins such as Tilak showed their disappointments about the colonialists/Orientalists for not writing enough about the exalted caste/racial status of brahmins and their place at the roots of Europe, there were other brahmins who clearly exulted in the everyday life of their exclusionary status among Indians. The biographies and autobiographical

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<sup>16</sup> See B. G. Tilak, *The Arctic Home in the Vedas*, (Poona City: Tilak Bros, 1956), 313.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

essays on the plethora of brahmin civil servants, musicians, lawyers, and academics provide us with the scope for examining their self-actualization of caste power far and beyond what the colonialists came to confer on them. More than a penchant for brahminical status, the subtle explications about the significance of being a brahmin in Indian society provided them with more authority than they probably had before over the others. For instance, M.S. Ramaswami Aiyar's biography of the musician Thiagaraja of South India, the most renowned guru of Carnatic music—at least in the way upper castes portray about him—begins with the words in the opening pages, “Giriraja Brahmam, a learned Muriginadu Thrailingya Telugu Brahmin of Bharadwaja Gothra, was our musician's grand father.”<sup>18</sup> Once the reader is clearly told about the caste of Thiagaraja, then his musical prowess is only axiomatic and the reader is invited into a carefully constructed semiotic zone which confers on Thiagaraja's music the power to move a stone and so on. It is another matter whether Aiyar, the biographer whose own caste status as a brahmin is reinforced through this work, is willing to ask whether Thiagaraja ever cared to train “a Pariah” in his repertoire that moved stones and animals or just left him out for the sake of keeping up the brahminical pedigree. Obviously, neither the musician-turned-god i.e., Thiagaraja nor his/its biographer i.e., Aiyar would do so for this is asking them to transgress what *varnaashrama dharma* destined them to be, and those who indulge in it have never been modern, but only have pretend to be so in order to reap the disproportionate material benefits of modernity while culturally locating themselves in a putative medieval or ancient times.

In the same vein, men like Sir A. Sasiah Sastri, S Srinivasa Raghava Aiyangar and others produced volumes narrating their brahmin status as an unquestioned (and legitimate?) cultural capital that served them well in not merely cultivating and mastering education in English and

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<sup>18</sup> M. S. Ramaswami Aiyar, *Thiagaraja*, (Madras: Everymans Press, 1927), 12.

British culture, but also serve the British well—only a few scholarly works have unpacked the entrenchment of the brahmins through such professions and biographies. For instance, the very first line of Sastri’s biography begins with the following words,

The Kaveri has long been held in great reverence by the Brahmans of Southern India. What the Sarasvati for the Vedic Seers, what the Ganges was to the ancient heroes of Aryavarta, that the Kaveri has been to the Brahmans in the South. Bands of emigrant Aryas settled on the banks of the sacred stream ... Aryan learning and Aryan institutions thrived in the land of their new adoption with fresh and youthful vigor.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, men like Aiyangar, celebrate the colonial rule for its judiciousness. His report on the colonial government’s work in the second half of the nineteenth century speaks about the Pariahs being doomed so long as they remain Hindus, and he instead insists on their conversion to Christianity and Islam.<sup>20</sup> Wittingly or unwittingly Aiyangar’s is also a joint-statement, so to speak, of the colonialists and brahmins proscribing the Pariahs from Hindu status, irrespective of their—the Parayars’—self-determination.<sup>21</sup>

What are the implications of the coming together of the Orientalists/colonialists and brahmins?<sup>22</sup> While we are not adequately equipped to exhaust all of it, what is clear is that we are in a position to notice certain developments in India since colonialism that have given a new lease of life to the upper castes, particularly the brahmins, but at the cost of its most marginalized

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<sup>19</sup> B. V. Kamesvara Aiyar, *An Indian Statesman: A Biographical Sketch*, (Madras: Srinivasas Varadachari and Co, 1902).

<sup>20</sup> Viswanath, *Pariah Problem*, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> S. Srinivasa Raghava Aiyangar, *Memorandum on the Progress of Madras Presidency*, (Madras: 1892), 152

<sup>22</sup> There is inadequate examination of the factors that resulted in what Gauri Viswanathan calls “collusion” between the brahmins and the colonizers. While literacy of the brahmins could have been a major attraction for the colonialists to enlist them *en masse* in their colonizing projects why they—the colonizers—left out others who were also experts in many vernaculars remains unexplored. See Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*, 235.

Other, the Dalits (here the term specifically refers to Parayars of South India as well to the Dalits in the sub-continent in general).<sup>23</sup> The emergence of the Indian national movements and the various outfits associated with them had the potential to break the barriers of caste, especially the dichotomy between the Pariah and the brahmin. However, even among the “nationalists” and their organizations of the nineteenth century Madras presidency that were to petition their various demands with the British, what was non-negotiable was their brahmin caste status in such organizations and their ability to reinscribe the Pariahhood and marginalize them different and lowly in public. For instance, whatever was the upper caste position became the Indian national position, whatever was Indian was taken for granted as the upper caste position. A rarified form of it was that the notions of Indian history, and the history of Hinduism or Hindus, were reduced to a history of the brahmins, mostly. Above all, the ascendance of brahmins through codifying the propriety of Sanskrit, Aryan home in the Arctic, and writing about it in English with the generosity of the Orientalists and the colonialists and the missionaries, inversely dispossessed, ghettoized, and dehistoricized those who were subjugated as the Pariahs. More importantly, the colonial-brahmin power comes to reinforce *Pariah qua Pariah*.

To be sure, the history of South India shows that there have been collective and organized challenges to the predominance of brahminical power. First, the non-brahmin movement in Madras presidency, for instance, right from the Justice Party, clearly exposed disparities between the brahmins and non-brahmins since the 1910's. Nevertheless, the non-brahmin movement was still immersed in caste-based dichotomies in two major ways: one, the opposition to brahmins was conceived through a collective notion of “non-brahmin,” which still entertained ironically a

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<sup>23</sup> While there are not enough studies about the precise status of brahmins in the pre-colonial times, it is evident that the Islamic rule in its various forms helped to contain the ascendance of brahmins. Arguably, with the British queen taking over India since 1858, the subcontinental rise of the brahmins to power occurs like never before.



hierarchy of castes within itself. Conspicuously, therefore, it remained a movement of sympathizers and followers of non-brahmin upper castes such as the Mudaliyars, Pillai, Chettiyars, and so on. This was so even when the non-brahmin movement took the form of Self-Respecters under E V Ramasamy alias Periyar, who played a stellar role in attacking untouchability and since 1929, brought into the movement many other communities that were not part of the anti-brahmin movement till then.<sup>24</sup> The result was that the cultural and political space of communities such as Parayars, and other Dalits who were categorized and spoken about as Depressed Classes/Adi-Dravidas even among the non-brahmin leaders (as it was with the brahmins then) never assumed the egalitarian treatment in non-brahmin consciousness. In other words, the identity status of these communities were ambiguously placed whether the non-brahmin ideologues spoke in terms of anti-caste and anti-religious terms or through Sudra Tamil identity vis-à-vis the brahmins.<sup>25</sup> This led to a reproduction or retention of a dichotomy between the Dalits and non-brahmins unsurprisingly, as it was between the non-brahmins and brahmins.

Second, some ideologues of a religious non-brahminism spoke in terms of common linguistic affinity among the Tamils. Particularly the Tamil Purist Movement of R. S. Vedachalam alias Marimalai Adikal (1876-1950) combined anti-brahminism with a putative Saivite identity vis-à-vis the Vaishnavism/Hinduism of the brahmins. Ironically, these affinities and identities at most led to the formation of “Saivite Self-Respecters” of dominant caste groups and thus were not to transcend the hierarchy of castes itself. Instead, there were caste-infused

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<sup>24</sup> For more details see V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: Iyothee Thass to Periyar* (Delhi: Samya, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> Even the present Dalit critique of the non-brahmin movement, especially of the Self-Respecters, while arguing that they too were hierarchised in the non-brahmin movements has not adequately clarified their positions in the historical and cultural sense regarding the problem of caste.

categories in Tamil such as *melor* and *kilor* (high and low people), *melsaatiyor* and *kiilsaatiyor* (upper castes and lower castes), *uyarkulam* and *taalkulam* (high-family and low-family) in circulation among the non-brahmin leaders, which were to re-produce the brahminical notions of dichotomy stretched among the non-brahmins. That is, for the land owning Vellalans (upper castes) the Parayar again became the Other, as she was for the brahmins.<sup>26</sup> The non-brahmin movement, therefore, after all its commendable displacement (not erasure) of the power of the brahmins from the public, continued to appropriate and retain the Dalit within the of double structures of simultaneous discrimination i.e., brahmin, and the non-brahmin upper castes.

In this context, while the dehumanizing burden of caste in South India has weighed heavily on the Dalits such as Parayars, the academic theorization and elaboration of the caste system in India in general has mostly reproduced a top-down model of examining the “complexities of caste” structurally that would always keep the brahmin on top and Dalit at the bottom. Even historical studies that claim to advocate a view “from below” and critique theoretical reflections on modern Indian history uphold a local brahmin points of view (as it is with “top down” approach) nonchalantly and make the local Dalits voiceless, and worse dehistoricise them.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the ever-growing field of caste studies irrespective of

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<sup>26</sup> See Vedachalam, *Velalar Nagarikam* (Madras: Paari, 1963 [1923]) and *Tamilar Matham* (Tinnevely: The South India Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society, 1965 [1941]).

<sup>27</sup> Ironically such a position is also celebrated in the words of an observer, “one can understand why...Bobs’ [Robert Eric Frykenberg] ‘bias’ in favor of indigenous agency and local initiative could be considered ‘revolutionary.’ He had, for instance, focused considerable attention on the role of Maratha Brahmins known as *Deshathas*, who became indispensable to the British as *dubashes* (lit., ‘bilingual people,’ i.e., ‘interpreters’ or ‘cultural intermediaries’).” See Richard Fox Young, “The Frykenberg *Vamsavali*: A South Asia Historian’s Genealogy, Personal and Academic, with a Bibliography of His Works,” in *India and the Indianness of Christianity: Essays on Understanding—Historical, Theological, and Bibliographical— in Honor of Robert Eric Frykenberg*, ed. Richard Fox Young, (Michigan/Cambridge, U.K: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 5.

disciplinary boundaries has mostly mirrored and replicated the privileged caste (mostly brahminical) voices and practices as *the* template to understand India. This is so even when the studies are to investigate non-brahmin and Dalit caste conditions—this trend is changing notably in some recent studies concerning Dalits and Christianity.<sup>28</sup> Imagining a field of anti-caste studies that are not just concerned with the experiences from below but discard understanding India with a brahminical blueprint<sup>29</sup> is still less significant. In fact, given the refractive power of the brahminical prism through which the Indian society is studied (past and present) and its global patronage today, replacing it is an impossibility in the foreseeable future to come.<sup>30</sup>

As against this reading of brahmin-parayar as well as non-brahmin-parayar dichotomies, so to speak, we can ask: Are there possibilities for making the anti-caste turn in caste studies that situate the Dalit voice in new ways? This study attempts to build on the idea that the caste system is not a monolithic structure, with the brahmin on top, especially in Tamil speaking regions.<sup>31</sup> This study, however, will examine whether there is scope to not only problematize the

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<sup>28</sup> See Viswanath, *Pariah Problem*; Roberts, *Power of Conversion*.

<sup>29</sup> The most renowned and problematic instance of this kind is Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: An Essay on the Caste System*, trans. Mark Sainsbury, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970).

<sup>30</sup> This condition is similar to the experience of the Aborigines in Australia as Stephen Muecke says, after declaring “I am a non-indigenous writer”, in his pathbreaking study, “We know the academic interest in indigenous cultures is a process that has been intensely carried out since the early twentieth century in Australia, but it has been a patchy, often one-way, conversion, often lacking humility or an acknowledgment of the shortcomings of its own position and so making for a very incomplete engagement.” See Stephen Muecke, *Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture, and Indigenous Philosophy*, (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004), 165-166.

<sup>31</sup> See Nicholas. B. Dirks, *Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). In addition, some studies emphasize that there are moments in which castes in the Tamil speaking region are indifferent to the caste system as such that they otherwise might follow in other circumstances. For instance see E. Valentine Daniel, *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*, (Berkeley: California University Press, 1984).

assumptions of the caste structure from the vantage point of the most oppressed of the caste system in the Tamil region i.e., Parayar, but also to entertain the possibilities of anti-caste or casteless Tamil socio-cultural ways.

It is here that the Buddhist movement in South India which is the focus of this study, and which arguably preceded the non-brahmin movements, becomes relevant. Given the complexity of Dalit positionalities against colonial and caste power in and through this movement, it is only imperative that Tamil Buddhism is taken up for serious investigation. This study aims, therefore, to investigate a set of questions about the Tamil Buddhist movement in South India since the late nineteenth-century to the present. Who are the Tamil Buddhists? What was their stand on the caste system in India and about their own status? In other words, how did they see their history in relation to the familiar brahminical/caste view of Indian culture, religions, economy, and history? How far do the Tamil Buddhist discursive and non-discursive practices succeed in recentering the marginalized of the caste system independent of brahmin / non-brahmin dichotomy? Could one talk about the philosophy, fiction, and history of the marginalized that stand against the caste system in India? If one could read an anti-caste modernity (modernities?) among the Tamil Buddhists, what are their resonances and divergences from the contexts and sources that the colonial South India provided them with?

This historical anthropological study relies methodologically on the personal and state archives. The weekly *The Tamilar* (published between 1907-1914) in South India especially, is the primary source of historical analysis. There are three chapters, apart from introduction and conclusion. Chapter one delineates the contours of an “anti-caste” discourse and argues that the marginalized communities, such as Parayars, discursively opposed their subjugation in anti-caste terms against both caste and colonial power of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Chapter two demonstrates how those who were classified by caste and colonial authorities as Parayars, in fact, not only rejected such categorization, but also re-articulated themselves as Tamil Buddhists in a variety of ways and succeeded largely in establishing a positive collective identity and history. The final chapter focuses on attempts to shape their material histories and potentialities through a discussion of conventional practices of petitioning the colonial government for changing their social conditions, but also by highlighting how the marginalized, such as Parayars, did not only wait for state and upper-caste dispensation of justice but instead mobilized their own resources and attempted to establish inclusive “casteless” institutions of social change.

**Chapter One**  
**Anti-caste Consciousness of the Self: Pandit C. Iyothee Thass and *The Tamilan***

Caste defined social relations in the last quarter of the nineteenth century colonial South India. The upheaval against it by the most oppressed in the caste system has been prevalent in various forms ever since. Communities and individuals who were classified as “lower castes”<sup>32</sup> by the prejudiced notions of the upper castes in the pre-colonial times, through Hindu scriptures and everyday practices, and legitimized through the colonial structures, such as census, emerged as the crucible in this politics of social transformation.<sup>33</sup> That is, those individuals who were categorized in pejorative terms threw up ideas that radically interrogated the presumptions about and authority of upper castes, and the colonialists’ vitiation of caste for their own motives did not have easy passage either. Notably such developments were in opposition to the lowering of some castes that corresponded with the elevation to the new lease of life that privileged castes were gaining under colonialism.<sup>34</sup> That is, those who were identified or categorized as various

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<sup>32</sup> The quotation marks here refer to the contested nature of these categories. For instance, those who were classified into Hindu religion and castes (as Pariahs) contested that they were not part of such imposed categorizations as they were against the caste system and the religious sanctity behind it. Evidences in this regard follows below. Hereafter, lower castes.

<sup>33</sup> See Thass’s open letter against S. Srinivasa Raghava Aiyangar in *Iyotheethasar Sinthanaigal – II*, ed. G. Aloysius, (Palayamkottai: Folklore Resources and Research Centre, 1999), 3-8. On the Parayars as casteless (in the sense of a lack i.e., lacking the virtue of caste) in the terms of brahmin owned newspapers such as *The Hindu* and for the non-distinction between “castelessness and labor” of the lower castes, especially the Parayars. See Viswanath, *Pariah Problem*, 219.

<sup>34</sup> For a detailed examination of the preponderance of brahmins over non-brahmins, and brahmins and non-brahmin upper castes over marginalized communities see Rosalind O’hanlon, *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology: Mahatma Jotora Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-century Western India*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1985); Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968); David Ludden, *Peasant History in South India*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985).

“upper castes” began to see themselves as different and above the others and were gaining socio-economic power in a variety of ways.<sup>35</sup> Conversely, those who were deemed lower castes criticized such projects of marginalization of the upper groups and the colonialists.<sup>36</sup>

These challenges of the lower caste groups, especially those who were consigned to the status of untouchables, were *genealogically profound* to borrow Bernard Williams’ phrase.<sup>37</sup> That is, lower castes were embedded in and marked by the philosophical, fictional and historical counter-positions against the prevailing notions of culture, religion, economy, and history. In other words, the normativization of people into high and low castes through the privileged castes’ terms and objectification of Hindu criteria to circumscribe an individual or a group of people in to a hierarchy would naturally elicit responses from those who were to suffer in such structures. In real terms this would mean the arrival of individuals, organizations, institutions,

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<sup>35</sup> Rupa Viswanath says that the “moral economy” justifying the marginalized in bonded labor with the upper caste landlords first occurred elaborately in colonial reports, and then gained frequency among the upper caste views and claims since the early nineteenth century. See Viswanath, *Pariah Problem*, 243.

<sup>36</sup> Rupa Viswanath writes about one P. Samuel, a Panchama [Parayar], “who sought to reconfigure the prevalent conceptions of morality [of the missionaries, the state, and the upper castes]...” And that the “Elite Indians, with membership in specific populations, were not, therefore, only ‘beneficiaries’ of a ‘system’ external to themselves, and nor were they... simply agents of corruption. They were themselves, especially by the end of the nineteenth century, key figures in the very determination of policy—not merely the ‘local’ executors of centrally-derived policy—and their personal interests were never a secret.” See Viswanath, *Pariah Problem*, 277 and 290.

<sup>37</sup> What Williams means by genealogy in his own words is this: “The name ‘genealogy’ can be appropriated to styles of writing... Some the story I shall tell... will explicitly be fiction; but this carries a claim that the fiction is helpful. Some of it claims to be history, accurate (I hope) in its facts and plausible in its interpretations. Quite a lot of it is philosophy (philosophy, that is to say, before it turns into history), which carries with it whatever claims are appropriate to philosophy, of being reasonable, convincing, or illuminating.” See Bernard Arthur Owen Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 9-10 and 19.

and socio-cultural practices that voiced the consciousness of the marginalized<sup>38</sup> (about their past and future) uncompromisingly and for the changes in the present conditions of caste. While we only have some conjectural evidence of some lower castes aligning against upper castes in pre-modern times, the colonial South India presents clearer evidences in this regard.

The oppressed in the Tamil speaking areas of South India were at the forefront in this struggle against the caste system in general, and the resurgence of the brahmins and brahminism<sup>39</sup> in particular.<sup>40</sup> Among many Pandit C. Iyothee Thass was a distinguished figure

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<sup>38</sup> Marginalized refers first and foremost to communities such as Parayars/Adi-Dravidars, Devendrakula Vellalars (Pallars), Aruntatiyars (Sakkiliars), and others who are also known as Dalits today. Interchangeably, the term “oppressed” is also used here to write about them. However, these terms are also inclusive of those such as Nadars, Vanniyars, and others who have suffered the travails of upper castes such as brahmins and vellalas.

<sup>39</sup> The common noun of “Brahman/Brahmin” is purposely written in lower case as “brahmin” in order to problematize the legitimacy that this category has gained among English speaking writers, academics, and the public (of brahmin caste origin mostly) as well as the dictionary meanings that occlude the domineering power behind it. The exceptions to this are those who have become auto-critics of their caste background in order to remake themselves as ex-brahmins.

Brahminism refers to the mobilization of religio-cultural and historical tenets that favor primarily the brahmin caste members in Indian society as well as to the power to prescribe (and proscribe?) the ways of life of those other than the brahmins by denying equal status and wealth to them aggressively or condescendingly. Many times non-brahmin upper castes and lower castes could also invoke such tenets appropriated by the brahmins, irrespective of the denial of the brahmins. However, such attempts to co-opt brahminical tenets neither effect change in the social conditions of lower castes or their caste locations nor undo the prerogatives of the brahmins themselves.

Casteism refers to the causation of cultural, political, economic, and institutional ideology and related practices that are present generally in Indian society and among the diaspora by which one group based upon its caste identity assumes/claims superiority over others in a variety of ways. Whereas the term casteist (in its noun and adjective forms) refers to an individual’s direct and everyday practices of caste discrimination with fellow humans. However, both are collective and/or individual/psychological in nature depending on the situation of the oppressor and oppressed.

Conceptually, the ideology and practice of brahminism and being brahminical, and casteism and being a casteist are expansive. That is, they mutate in many forms and are therefore in need of reconceptualization constantly to configure new forms of discrimination in public and private.



of this movement. Born in 1845, Thass' original name was Kathavarayan. Given the admiration for his teacher Tondaimandalam Vallakalatinagar Vee. Iyothithassa Kaviraya Panditar, he changed his name to Pandit C. Iyothee Thass.<sup>41</sup> Thass' intervention as a man of anti-caste ideas and practices began in the 1890's. But his multifaceted criticism against caste power achieved its prominence primarily through the publication of a Tamil weekly *The Tamilan*; in English it was titled as "The One Pice Tamilian,"<sup>42</sup> from June 19, 1907 to April 29, 1914 (hereafter *The Tamilan*). *The Tamilan* was an A-4 size four-page magazine, which had serialized articles and leader page editorials written by Thass in every issue.<sup>43</sup> Likewise others, women and men, could

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They are, in other words, not conceptually frozen in order to notice the recurrence or mutations of caste in new contexts and new circumstances of a particular context.

This study is also of the view that investigations of brahminism/casteism and brahminical/casteist practices are ought not to be exercises in posing questions that seek to help us to merely comprehend a practice and/or system, but ought to be exercises in finding problems to be ameliorated, individual and collective. Furthermore, they are philosophical issues before the world that call for tools of general and specific theories of understanding as much as direct actions against them.

<sup>40</sup> While the Dalits petitioning the East India Company for policy changes begins in 1779, the establishment of Dalit associations ("Adi-Dravida"), and the publication of periodicals such as Adi-Dravidar Mahavikada Tootan, Pooloka Viyan, Parayan, and Adi-Dravida Mitran (which have been lost) began in the 1860's. See Anbu Ponnoviyam "Prologue," in *Iyothethasar Sinthanaigal – I*, ed. G. Aloysius, (Palayamkottai: Folklore Resources and Research Centre, 1999), xxiv-xxv.

<sup>41</sup> Sometimes his name was also printed as Pandit C. Iyothee Dass.

<sup>42</sup> Thass never stated the reason for naming the weekly as "One Pice Tamilian" [*One Penny Tamilian*] explicitly in the magazine itself. Probably, he named it so to refer to the low worth accorded to the communities that he was writing about—he was ironic here—and yet to register their critical positions on many issues. Since many readers wanted the name to be changed, it becomes "The Tamilian" (hereafter *The Tamilan*) from 1908.

<sup>43</sup> *The Tamilan* could be compared with *The Chicago Defender* in America, in terms of its time frame, design, radical anti-race contents, health columns, local and international news, and reach among the marginalized i.e., African Americans. Like the *The Tamilan*, which rejected the caste names of communities such as Parayar, *The Defender*—founded on May 5, 1905 by Robert S. Abbott—never used the categories "negro" or "blacks." Instead it preferred usages such as "the Race," "the Race men, and Race women" to refer to the African Americans. For a detailed

publish serialized articles on themes of religion, law, Tamil literature, economy, agriculture and a Ladies Column in *The Tamilan*. It also had Indian as well as international tidbits of news and box items that ranged from the African American migration from the US South to the North and into Canada, to research at Columbia University. The last page usually carried advertisements.

This chapter will attempt to examine the voices of those who were classified as untouchables, particularly as Parayars<sup>44</sup> (Pariah) in South India against those who had assumed the status of upper castes. Using *The Tamilan* as the primary archive this chapter will also examine some aspects of the discourse of Thass and other men and women, which sought to mobilize the public against the caste system in many pockets of South India then.

### **Madras Mahajana Sabha – 1892**

The year 1892 was a moment of self-examination for Pandit C. Iyothee Thass. At the meeting of Madras Mahajana Sabha<sup>45</sup> in April that year, in which he participated as a representative of the Nilgris area, Thass' assumptions about Hindu<sup>46</sup> identity, that Saivism and

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examination of the critical role of *The Chicago Defender* in the history of African American movement see James. R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago Black Southerners and the Great Migration* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1989).

<sup>44</sup> In this dissertation the widely transliterated term *Paraiyar* is not used to avoid reductionist view of its origin only through the percussion instrument *Parai*. Instead it is kept as Parayar in order to open this category to multiple origin stories, including its rejection as derogatory category of the upper castes. It is important to note here that many scholarly studies unproblematically use categories such as “ex-untouchables,” “untouchables,” “Paraiyar,” and “Dalits,” either individually or in some mixed manner. The possibilities of how these people see themselves beyond such pejorative terms and registering so in studies about them are yet to take center stage.

<sup>45</sup> Madras Mahajan Sabha was founded in 1884. For further details, R. Suntharalingam, *Politics and Nationalist Awakening in South India 1852-1891*, (Delhi: Manohar, 1980). *Mahajana* means “the people” and *Sabha* means “assembly.”

<sup>46</sup> The uncritical usage of the category Hindu overlooks the caste divisions within, which, in fact, belie any assumption of a homogeneous religious community. Furthermore, this also leads to a

Vaishnavism are common heritage of all Indians and hopes about common brotherhood among Indians, came to a rude collapse. The Mahajana Sabha was a platform of the privileged castes such as brahmins and other land-owning upper castes, which petitioned the British for material and status gains.<sup>47</sup>

Thass' presence as a non-upper caste, much worse as a representative of those who were denigrated by those privileged castes gathered as Parayars, was to serve as a moment of revelation for himself and others of his kind about the Sabha. From the callousness of the upper caste members not to let the voice of the lower castes be heard at the Sabha to the ridicule of the latter's demands for a common identity between the upper and lower castes were enough to spark Thass's understanding that there was no common identity between the privileged castes and marginalized communities such as Parayars. Rather, for him they belonged to two different worlds: one that was caste; the other, casteless.<sup>48</sup> Explanation is in order.

Titling his piece "to the casteless poor Dravidians" (*saatipetamatra tiravidarkalaakum elaikudikalaku*) in *The Tamilan* on October 21, 1908, Thass reminisces about his experience at the Madras Mahajana Sabha meeting sixteen years earlier. He narrates that the organizing-president Honorable. P. Arangaiya Naidu<sup>49</sup> of the Sabha introduced the agenda of the meeting one by one, but struck off the item titled "Parayar problem" (Thass transliterates it in Tamil)<sup>50</sup>

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distorted view that India is a country of "Hindu majority," given the cultural and historical antagonisms between groups who are purportedly classified as "Hindus," on the one hand, and cultural and historical commonalities between "lower castes" and those who are classified as religious minorities such as Muslims and Christians, on the other.

<sup>47</sup> Arguably the Sabha never functioned as a body opposing the British colonialism. Rather it served as an agency to promote the gains from the British, especially since most of the members were functionaries in the colonial administration. See Suntharalingam, *Politics*, 1980.

<sup>48</sup> By "casteless" Thass means those who are outside the caste system.

<sup>49</sup> "Naidu" refers to a land-owning upper caste.

<sup>50</sup> Thass's spelling *Parayar* is in consonant with my definition in footnote 4.

with a pencil saying that some British officials have “written enough” and so there is no point in “we” discussing “their problems.” When the secretary of the Sabha, Maa. Sri. M. Veera Ragavachariya, announced that a representative of “their community” was at the meeting, Thass says he got up at once and said the following, “Sir, by saying that some British officials are helping these communities all of you keeping quiet is wrong. Since it is because of you that these communities have been oppressed and lost their livelihood, it is you who are responsible to set it right.”<sup>51</sup> After his intervention, Thass writes, that the Speaker of the Sabha, whose name is not mentioned, asked what he wanted the Sabha to do. For which Thass demanded

Sir, it is said that for all kinds of people (*sakalasaatiyor*) in the world the gods and temples are common. If that is the case, then, why should not those who are Vaishnavites and Saivites (Hindu sects) from among these communities, i.e., those oppressed as lower castes/untouchables, be allowed to enter the Vishnu and Siva temples, since this will not only foster mutual understanding and well-being among each other but also strengthen the concerned religions.

The moment he finished stating his demand for temple entry, Thass says, all the Sabha members got up and shouted no to this demand, while Maa. Sri. Sivarama Sastri, the brahmin representative of Tanjavur said, “we have given to your community gods such as Maduraiveera Sami, Kaateri Sami, Karuppana Sami. Siva and Vishnu are not the gods of your community.” Thass writes that this led to his reply, “Sir, if that is the case then we do not need your gods,” and instead asked for recommendation to the British government for free education up to fourth-grade and allotment of vacant lands for the oppressed Parayars. The Sabha consented for such recommendations to the British—pointedly not taking it upon themselves to fulfill this demand.

This reprinting of his experience at the Madras Mahajana Sabha in April 1892 serves as an early template that not merely reveals the long history of Thass’ political-economic activism but also points to the trajectories of marginalized communities’ discursive. Many caste wedges

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<sup>51</sup> Translations are mine, except where it is mentioned otherwise.

that the privileged groups thrust between themselves and those they deemed as lower castes marked Thass's encounter with the Madras Mahajana Sabha meeting at the Victoria Mahal in Chennai. To begin with, the marginal notation Thass makes of Naidu, the president, striking the "Parayar problem" from the agenda by saying that some British officials have "written" about it and thus does not deserve "we discussing it," is a text that embodies the attitudes of the upper castes towards others then. Calling the agenda the "Parayar problem" is itself similar to W E B Du Bois's interpretation of the whiteman's perception of the conditions of the "Negros," their being a problem to white America.<sup>52</sup> However, unlike some white men in America who gave even their lives to change the African American conditions<sup>53</sup>, Indian upper castes, without exception, delegated the Parayar problem to the British in a manner that belied their making of the problem. Thus, the privileged castes not only preferred to keep quiet about the Parayar problem but also attempted to erase it from the concerns of the Indian public under colonialism. However, it is significant to note that a subaltern had spoken.

Thass, despite being a lone representative of the oppressed and being called "a problem" by a gathering of upper caste landlords, gave a resounding reply that it was the upper castes who were "responsible" for the conditions of the oppressed, and in this manner indicated his position against the caste system.

To be sure, Thass, despite his early proficiency in *dvaita* and *advaita* religious traditions, not taking the hiatus between the scriptural and social practices seriously as well as the patronage they enjoyed among the upper castes could have led to his naive suggestion for social

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<sup>52</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003). Rupa Viswanath also makes similar connection between the "Paraiyah Problem" and W E B Du Bois. See Viswanath, *Pariah Problem*, 13.

<sup>53</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America 1860-1880*, (New York: Russel and Russel, 1935).

transformation—creating a casteless society in India—particularly by the co-mingling of upper and lower castes through religious oneness in Hindu temples and worship. The reaction of upper caste men, however, who vehemently opposed Thass's propositions served not just as a metaphor for the power of caste of that time. More importantly, this moment of upper caste refusal of transforming caste relations was to change Thass's understanding of caste based cultural and economic history of India hereafter.

Thass's Sabha experience, in fact, exemplified how upper caste men derived their privileges through religion and religio-spatial divisions (i.e., separate temples and gods) between themselves and those they codified as lower castes. The pronouncements of upper castes that their gods i.e., Siva and Vishnu were not for the lower castes, and even that they were the benefactors of the gods of the marginalized, were to leave a long-lasting impression upon Thass, enabling him to thereafter raise cathartic questions against the upper castes and to find answers for the marginalized communities' redemption. That is, what was taken for granted in the name of Hinduism, brahminism, caste-order, material basis of caste structure, temple worship and services, gender relations, subjugation of lower castes and women in the name of caste, and so on come under Thass's critical scrutiny.

The Madras Mahajana Sabha meeting, thus, resulted not only in Thass's complete distrust of the upper castes, particularly the brahmins, in all walks of life, but also left him with an impression that the Parayars were more likely to find and could only find solutions from the British/Europeans/others than from the upper castes—key to why the marginalized come to trust the late colonial officials more than the upper caste leaders of Indian National Congress.

Furthermore, the discrimination of fellow Indians as lower castes by members of Indian organizations such as Madras Mahajana Sabha, appears to have influenced Thass to write about

humanity philosophically. These explorations appear at various points in *The Tamilan* under various titles, which are, interestingly, inclusive of those who stand against caste in general.

Thematically, however, they are deeply critical of the caste discriminating beliefs and practices of upper caste Indians.

### **Who is human?**

In a leader page article Thass examines the theme of what it is to be a human being.<sup>54</sup> For him only those who have the qualities of peace, compassion, and generosity (santam, anbu, and eegai) deserve to be called human; and in fact, being caste-free was tantamount to practicing such values. If one does not possess these qualities one is still a beast though one may appear as a human. That is why Thass says that those who claim to belong to upper castes are not really high people, for their actions are so beastly that they remain low, and therefore, subhuman. In the same vein Thass refutes those who claim upper caste status by emphasizing that those who kill fellow beings, those who ruin other people's lives, those who steal, those who are alcoholic, and those who indulge in prostitution can never be noble people even though they may claim to be as such. On the contrary, because of their violent nature, such people remain low. For Thass, brahmins as a community are the epitome of such violence because they build social hierarchies of exclusion. Thass, by arguing that it is a misnomer to call somebody a brahmin who lives by killing, stealing, lies, and sexual exploitation, debunks brahmins' self-proclamations of religiosity; instead, he says, an ideal brahmin is one who abhors such practices of hatred. Despite his being critical of brahmins and the caste system, Thass is infusing new meaning to

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<sup>54</sup> *The Tamilan* July 26, 1911. (Hereafter *T*).

being a brahmin through *The Tamilan*.<sup>55</sup> Thass's reading of brahminism as the motor-force of many ills in Indian society is clear in this write up. However, his ambiguities about the category of brahmin are also shown in his effort to retain it, ironically even to refer through it to the Other of the brahmins i.e., the Parayars—no wonder his views of ideal-brahmin do not gain much strength among the Tamil Buddhists who otherwise subscribed to his theses in general. Such ideas are furthermore elaborated in Thass's other writings in *The Tamilan* that attempt to examine Indian society's paradoxical religo-cultural notions.

### **“The Essential Principles Which [a] True Man Should Practice”**

Titling a four part serial in English Thass writes about the four principles that one needs to practice in one's life: knowledge (*vittai*), rationality (*putti*), generosity (*eegai*), and right path (*sanmarkam*). Each principle is discussed in consecutive weeks for what it is, on the one hand, and the violence resulting from the lack of those principles on women and humanity through brahminical practices and Hindu notions of god, on the other.

Explaining that *vittai* i.e., knowledge, is of two kinds, educational (*kalvivittai*) and handiwork (perhaps Aristotles's *techné*?) (*kaittolivittai*), Thass says that education in books (perhaps, *Sophia*?) (*kalainool*) is to enhance one's understanding of the world. Identifying five Tamil classics *nikandu*, *divakaram*, *tirukural* (*tirikkural*), *naaladi*, and *pancalakcanam* as the most important books, Thass elaborates that they are called *kalainool*, since *kalai* means moon. Like the moon, he says, one needs to grow and shed light for two purposes, for the prosperity of humanity and for overcoming the four life-events: birth, disease, senility, and death. The knowledge of *techné*, on the other hand, is gained through working with wood, metal, muscle,

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<sup>55</sup> The full import of such subversion is discussed in chapter 2.



and cotton, by young and old. Thass calls all *techné* as intricate-craft (*suttiratolil*), given the physicality and expertise involved. Like the educational knowledge all crafts and professions, such as agriculture and business, are meant not only for personal prosperity but also for the wellbeing of humanity.

In contrast, Thass repudiates Hindu scriptures and asks whether those that celebrate male gods taking two or twenty thousands wives, stealing butter and raping many women (referring to the god Krishna), stealing food (referring to the god Ganesha), property dispute between brothers resulting in mass murder of people (reference to *The Mahabarata*), destruction of a nation because someone took one's wife (reference to *The Ramayana*), etc., could be called historical books. Rather, he says, such literatures not only foster laziness and destructive qualities but also make one live like a beast, not a human being. Likewise, as opposed to his elaboration of knowledge of agriculture that involves bodily nuance and exertion, Thass attacks brahminical rituals of worship as handiwork of the shiftless-men (*tadisomberikal*) that make living by beggary<sup>56</sup> a virtue. In treating such practices as 'knowledge' would not only destroy oneself, but also the family and nation, warns Thass. In this radical rejection of brahminical and masculinist ways of living he writes, "instead of making people believe that the unknown god from an unknown world would give succor and thus making them live in self-destructive indolence, it is imperative to enhance people's lives better in this-world by following productive knowledge practices and their practitioners."<sup>57</sup>

In the next part, Thass describes rationality (*putti*) as learning and doing by observation and practice (closer to Aristotle's *phronesis*), which could help create things in this world that

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<sup>56</sup> Thass uses the term beggary to mean that the brahmin priests parasitically live on alms and on the labor of those they categorize as lower castes.

<sup>57</sup> T July 9, 1913.

are useful to one and humanity. In this sense, he celebrates the inventions such as fountain pen, typewriting, photography, telegraph, lithograph, telephone, ship, train, and airplane. Knowing full well that these are western contributions to humanity, he welcomes and urges people to follow such creative rationality.<sup>58</sup> Contrasting such inventiveness, Thass asks “whether creating and spreading lies in the name of *Vedas*, castes, and *Puranas* that destroy the nation be called rational achievement?” Criticizing the assumptions behind the caste system, he rhetorically chides the story about the emergence of brahmins:

if Brahma was the creator of the world and if the brahmins have descended from his face, have they invented anything worthwhile that is useful to humanity? Have they added anything more to old broomstick, umbrella, palm-fan, water-lift, plough, and weaving? Instead of creating things for the well being of people, they have invented living by laziness and hatred for each other.<sup>59</sup>

For these reasons he denounces the brahmins as “graveyard faces” (*sudukaattumuncikal*), which he describes as equivalent to what one does when one encounters bodies burning in graveyards. That is, he means ashen faces. Making such faces, Thass says, is the contribution of the brahmins to the people by inventing caste and religious divisions.<sup>60</sup> Identifying brahmins as the progenitors of caste, Thass says the non-brahmins such as Naidus, Mudaliyar, and Chetiarys (among the Tamils) too have imbibed such tendencies to introduce divisions among themselves and to spread hatred between communities.

Referring to all those who subscribe to caste divisions as “irrational people” (*putiyin viruti attriripporkalal*), Thass says, when they encountered those who live without caste and religious divisions they not only oppress (*talti*) them as Parayars and Panchamars but also their

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<sup>58</sup> Thass’s view of *putti* (reason) is more anchored in life-enhancing and this-worldly understanding.

<sup>59</sup> *T* July 16, 1913.

<sup>60</sup> His views on nation are elaborated in the second and third chapter.

quarter, half, and three-fourth graveyard faces that they show among themselves and between various castes become full.<sup>61</sup> Observing that “those who masquerade under caste and live by beggary claim their status as high castes, whereas those who till the land are demeaned as low castes; likewise, those who live by lies and exploitation become upper castes and those who labor become lower castes. Instead of the progress of rationality hatred spreads among the people of the nation.” Thass concludes this section by appealing to people not be deluded by caste and religious divisions. Rather, they should expand their rational ways of living, even by emulating the British inventors.

In the third part, Thass describes the meaning of generosity (*eegai*) as a principle by which one feeds the hungry, one heals the ill, one provides clothing for the needy, and one shares space for the homeless. He insists that everyone should practice this principle. Interestingly, Thass finds such generosity is manifested in the British creation of free hospitals, drought relief, and free resting places, although (as we will see below), it is the enlightened Buddhists (in pre-modern and modern times) who are the epitome of the practice of generosity for Thass, since their practices and ideas enabled the prosperity of materiality in many walks of life among the poor and needy. However, Thass attacks the caste and religious divisions as signs of the collapse of this principle of generosity, since aggression between castes and religions is the reality. Furthermore, he says because of the ignorance fostered by the caste system, instead of the poor, the rich and lazy-gluttons are fed more, which has led to the ruination of the Indian nation. Thass exhorts people to examine before believing in anything by raising questions. Thus he urges people to ask: if there was a deity called Brahma where is he now? If somebody was born from the face of Brahma from where is he born now? If somebody says that a *lazy-fat-jobless-*

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<sup>61</sup> The graveyard face metaphor is welcomed and acknowledged by readers in the next issue of *The Tamilan* on July 23, 1913.

*man* (referring to brahmin priests) should be given free food, should it not be asked why is it so? Thus, he says, the practice of the true principle of generosity will help society at large.

In the final part, Thass elaborates the principle of the right-path (*sanmarkam*). In short, for Thass the right-path is leading life that is helpful to oneself and others. Thus, he urges people to create paths by which others may come to benefit from knowledge and material prosperity to the best of their capabilities. Likewise, leading a right life also means not inflicting pain on other creatures and fellow beings as well as avoiding self-destructive alcoholism and debauchery. One who practices such right-ways of living will not only be recognized as a high person, but will attain nirvana, which is being in the state of peace (*nityanandam*).

Contrary to such a principle of following the right-path, those who practice caste and religious divisions are those who set out along the path of inequity (*tunmarkam*) and sorrow. The manifestation of such a negative life may be seen in the destruction of a hundred families for the benefit of one's own; in indulging in lies about god for the sake of material benefits; in bribing god and the priest, bribing at home and work, bribing in wages; in believing in and practicing the lies called Shastras. In order to prevent such destructive indulgences, Thass not only urges to follow the good ways of the British, but also practice that which will help the prosperity of "our nation" (*namatu tesattai*).

Thass concludes his fourth part by examining the principles of man by repeating that one who does not practice these principles of knowledge, rationality, generosity, and right-path remains a beast even though he may appear as "a man." Therefore, he urges those who consider themselves as belonging to humanity to practice them. The undercurrent of this enunciation is to appeal and insist that people should give up irrational practices such as caste and priestcraft that drive people to do unethical acts against their fellow beings.

These ideas are further sharpened in Thass's analysis of the notions of the high and the low among people. In an editorial article titled, "who are the high and the low people," Thass examines the qualities that make someone a highly respectable individual and those that makes another abominable.<sup>62</sup> At the outset Thass says that irrespective of one's nationality and the language one may speak, those who have high values respect a human being and treat others in the way one would treat oneself. Furthermore, such high persons do not pretend to see or know things that they neither see nor know in order to exploit and cheat their fellow human beings. Since such people respect life they extend their love to animals and practice ahimsa (non-violence) as their credo.<sup>63</sup> By their disavowal of stealing, alcohol consumption, and infidelity and by following the principles of knowledge, rationality, generosity, and the right-path they not merely take care of themselves but also take care of others in the same way, especially the poor. For these reasons, Thass says, such people are esteemed high and become a high class of people (*uyartasaatiyor / merkulam*). In contrast, Thass points out that those who are judged low stand against humane values; not only do they discriminate their fellow beings and other creatures but also indulge in cruelties. Furthermore, because such people dupe others by making claims to things they do not possess, they remain liars. While calling others low castes and outcastes (*ilintorkal*) of society, in fact, they themselves become low or base. (*kilsatiyor*).

Thass's definition of what it is to be human, the humane practices that one should follow, and who should be regarded as high and low people, interrogate the caste system, and charge, directly and indirectly, brahmins in particular as being the fountain head of inhumanity. Clearly Thass waxes poetic in his attack on brahmanical practices in naming them beggary in contrast to

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<sup>62</sup> *T* January 10, 1912.

<sup>63</sup> Thass was practicing vegetarian and strongly attacks those who indulge in animal flesh for food.

agrarian labor and life of those who are oppressed as low caste, and in calling brahmins: graveyard faces, irrational people, dupes, liars and low-class people. In fact, Thass does not hesitate to name-calling the brahmins as graveyard faces—a phrase that comes close to mean ashen face, but in the context of Tamil speakers that would refer metaphorically to someone who squirms at those who advocate egalitarian principles in society. This also shows amidst his serious reflections and theses against the caste system, and brahmins, Thass expresses his gut feelings of a person who is disgusted with caste.

Interestingly, however, Thass criticism of the caste system and brahmins is not primarily the response of a lower caste person, of a victim, or of “a representative of the Parayars,” as brahmins called him at the Madras Mahajana Sabha meeting in 1892. Instead he raises broader philosophical questions about humanity and right living, about the incommensurability of the caste system to such principles, and the oppression perpetrated by brahmins on those who labor for themselves and others. Thus his opposition to caste and the brahmin is a result of non-exclusionary values inspired by Buddhism and an understanding of humanity that transcends national boundaries—the points will be discussed in greater detail in the second and third chapters. Having made his position clear that he is for a non-discriminating society that stands for dignity of labor and progress of all Indians, Thass proceeds to analyze the category of people classified and subjected as Parayars (Pariah).

### **“WHO ARE THE DEPRESSED, THE ILLITERATE, AND THE UNTOUCHABLES”**

Keeping the above English title as well as its translation in Tamil through his method of raising questions Thass asks, “Is someone with contagious disease and practices hatred, lies, vengeance, bias, trickery, and foolery an untouchable person, or those who till the land with

sweat and blood and fulfill many necessities of human society an untouchable?”<sup>64</sup> Here the formulation of Thass is to point out the ironies of the caste system and irrationalities of the category of “untouchable.” However, he also has an explanation as to why the classification of a people as untouchables came into being. Thass says, that in South India a man belonging to a large community is defined as belonging to a low caste (*taltasaati*), ignorant (*arivillatavan*), and untouchable (*teentatakatanavan*). This is because of, he concludes, the age-old rivalry and prejudice between those who are classified as untouchables and those who assume the right to classify the others i.e., the brahmins.

The wise, Thass writes, are aware of the knowledge of those “depressed” by the caste system. It is only such people who should decide whether those who discriminate and denigrate others in the name of caste and call them ignorant and untouchables, are wise. Or, Thass adds, those who, despite being subjected to such indignities, do not practice caste and instead treat humans as humans and exert their bodies to labor in order to live, are indeed wise. He makes a radical conclusion to this piece<sup>65</sup> by stating that true to the saying that those who are oppressed shall rise, those who have been oppressed by the wisdom-less (*arivilikal*) will be recognized as people with wisdom in the days to come.

Thass’s views on untouchability are a counter-position to the logic of the caste system of power. That is, Thass rejects the demeaning view of the brahmin who sees those who are named low castes; the view that they lack any honorable qualities. Furthermore, he exposes the bogusness of the brahmin entitlement to anything that could be regarded as wisdom, on two counts: a) that the latter lack labor as a way of living, and b) that they indulge in caste discrimination which is a inhuman practice. In contrast, Thass argues that those who are

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<sup>64</sup> *T* April 19, 1911.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

oppressed as untouchables live by labor that helps them and their fellow human beings, and like most people all over the world, they do not indulge in the brutality of caste discrimination as the brahmins do.

The readers of the *The Tamilan* may find it difficult to comprehend who does Thass refer to as “the wise” who could perceive the distinct ways of life between those who are categorized as untouchables and those who define them as such i.e., the brahmins. However, it also signals that Thass is open to the possibility of people shedding social prejudices, such as caste and race, in order to become individuals who would appreciate social relations beyond distinctions of hierarchy.

In historicizing untouchability, Thass’s view that practicing Buddhism was a fundamental reason for the later emergence of the caste system and untouchability opens new interpretations of the history of caste.<sup>66</sup> In fact, he locates the rivalry between the Parayars and brahmins as actually a rivalry between Buddhism and Brahminism. Once such a view becomes the benchmark for understanding the relations between the Parayars and brahmins, skepticism about the structural and cultural immutability of caste is made viable. In fact, the antagonism between those oppressed as untouchables and the brahmins as the epitome of the oppressors behind the veneer of religiosity becomes the core of Thass’s analysis of the history of caste—which, in fact, goes against the grain of conventional and academic perceptions caste.

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<sup>66</sup> In fact, Thass anticipates Ambedkar, who also wrote on the same theme with similar titles and details. Ambedkar includes people’s food habits such as beef eating and menial labor are also the reasons for the institutionalization of untouchability in addition to their being Buddhists. See B. R. Ambedkar, *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Beacme Untouchables?* (New Delhi: Amrit Book and Co, 1948).



### “Saati” verus “Jati”

Thass does not view the Tamil term *saati* as a reference to caste. Instead he illuminates that the original usage *saati* refers to the verb “perform” or the noun “section” in Tamil language. *Saati*, therefore, is also a short form of *saatipor/saatiyor*, those who perform or practice a particular language in their society, meaning a linguistic community. Significantly he says *saati* refers to the linguistic region of a people, thus, those who spoke Tamil language became *Tiravidasaatiyor*, likewise the *Kannadasaatiyor* (referring to Kannada speakers), *Aantirasaatiyor* (referring to Telugu speakers), *Maraashtakasaatiyor* [sic] (referring to Marathi speakers) in South India.<sup>67</sup> In addition, by citing the Tamil classical literature *Nannool* (its section 353), Thass unpacks the etymological basis of the terms *saatipor* and *saatiyor*, to say that the former means “those who perform,” whereas the latter means “those who belong to a particular section or sections.”<sup>68</sup>

Here Thass’s thesis is to unsettle the upper caste centered understanding of Tamil linguistic community. This he does in order to create the possibilities for a post-caste society by examining pre-caste etymologies and linguistic claims that for Thass have under caste connotations in the present. While Pavanandi’s *nannool* is a text that discusses about the rules for the appropriation of Sanskrit into Tamil, and thus it might not serve the purpose for Thass’s investigations against caste inflected meanings of literary and popular aspects of Tamil fully. Yet the fact that Thass views Sanskrit and Tamil as sister languages would still allow him to

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<sup>67</sup> For Thass linguistic and religious aspects are crucial components of humane community formation.

<sup>68</sup> Etymologically, for Thass the terms *saatipor* and *saatiyor* could be split in the following manner: *saati* (perform) + *ip* (link letter) + *por* (people) = *saatipor*; *saati* (section) + *yi* (link letter) + *yor* (people) = *saatiyor*.

make arguments about communitarianism of various linguistic communities that could go beyond demarcations of caste.

Having shown that the original reference of the term *saati* is to point to one's linguistic identity (i.e., section, in the noun sense of the term), not caste, Thass explains his interpretation through instances of questions and answers: that if one were to ask a person "what is your *saati*?" the answer could be, he says, Telugu speaker (*Aantira-saati*) or Kannada speaker (*Kannada-saati*), or Marati speaker (*Maraashtaka-saati*) or Tamil speaker (*Tiravida-saati*)—Thass refers to Tamil as Tiravidam as well, which will be discussed in details in chapter 3. While this might be true about the interactions between various linguistics communities, however, how is the question "what is your *saati*?" answered *within* a linguistic community is not stressed and explained with evidences.

On the other hand, Thass is aware that not only the term *saati* / *jati* currently refers to caste in the Indian society but also there are paraphernalia of terms and categories associated with it in the exclusionary and hierarchical sense (that is *kulam*, *gotra*, *varnam*, and *samayam*). He provides, therefore, more questions and answers as illustrations in order to recuperate the original *casteless* sense of *saati* and other terms associated with it. He writes,

if one were to ask a person 'what is your *kulam* / family?' the answer could be to point out one's family profession (*kudumbattolil*) as *vaisiya kulam* / business family or *sootira kulam* / agricultural family. Likewise, if one were to ask a third person 'what is your *varnam* / color?' when one has not seen that person before, one may answer that that person is dark or mixed or fair. Likewise if one were to ask a person 'what is your *samayam* / time?' the answer could refer to the activity that a person is engaged in a day, if it is practicing Buddhist Dhamma (ethical-way-of-life), one would say *Buddha-samayam*, if it is performing multiple chores then it could be *arunkalai-samayam*, if it is meditation and learning time from the Buddhist monks then the answer could be *saiva-samayam*.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *T* March 8, 1911.

Here Thass clearly rejects the present narrow meaning of the word *samayam* as religion, instead prefers to retain the popular “time,” as the original meaning—even if arguably the term *samayam* may very well equally refer to religion among the Tamil people.

Thass attributes the ascendance of the brahmins as the reason for the displacement of the original meaning of the term *saati*, that is, from linguistic sense and identity to caste identity. This was possible, Thass explains, through brahminical violence on Buddhists. Because the latter exposed the masquerade and pseudo-religions of the former, in turn, the Buddhists were dubbed as lower caste Parayars by the brahmins. Moreover, what were vocational classifications, that is, learned / monk (*antanan*), ruler (*arasan*), businessman (*vanikan*), and agriculturist / farmer (*velaalan*) in Tamil, turned into caste hierarchy as brahmin *saati*, kshatriya *saati*, vaishya *saati*, and sootira *saati*, in the *jati* sense. Thass holds the oppression and ignorance of the brahmins responsible for the vocational divisions among people and the establishment of endogamous castes. Emphatically arguing that the brahmins do not have any sympathy for other castes than themselves, Thass points out that since the Buddhists who spoke (*paraituvantavarkal*) against the brahminical impostures (*vesankal*) of claiming to be the highest caste, they were oppressed as Parayars and continue to suffer so in all walks of life. In this the brahminical “trickery” of dividing people and inciting animosity against the Buddhists led to their downfall as Parayars. Furthermore, Thass adds that the pseudo-brahmins shape the views of westerners who in turn reproduce the caste categories in their social practices and relations thus contributing to denigrating the so-called lower castes further.<sup>70</sup> Thus he says the brahmins not only cover up the social-history of India and make a virtue of their exclusionary living that

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<sup>70</sup> *T* March 8, 1911. Thass’s observations about the westerners’ role in the reproduction of caste in India is uncanny in the sense that he anticipates the arrival of not only Dumont, but also many other anthropological interventions that parrot what Gerald Berreman called “a brahminical view of caste.”

does not allow any concern for those other than their own caste members, Thass arraigns them for influencing the western immigrants in India.<sup>71</sup> Here Thass points out the colonialists imbibing and vitiating the caste categories, particularly the inferiorization of the Buddhists as Parayars.

Thass concludes this essay on saati by observing that even though the notions of upper and lower castes are meaningless, they have gained currency because of the brahminical propaganda (*solvallabataal*), nevertheless when the learned arise these lies will be exposed. What should be referred to by saati, he says, is one's performance (in the linguistic or sectional or vocational sense), whereas what is now fabricated into *jati* (caste) is meaningless.

Thass's exposition of what is saati, vis-à-vis *jati* or caste, seeks to achieve a variety of impacts. By making a distinction between the original and the latter sense of saati, he creates the space for reading the presence of linguistic communities preceding the brahminical caste system in India. Emphasizing the experiential, professional, and practical aspects of saati, varnam, kulam, and samayam Thass demystifies the abstract superior and inferior notions of caste as projected by the brahmins. Likewise, introducing the categories pseudo-brahmins (*veshapiraminarkal*) versus real-brahmins (*etartapiraminarkal*), Thass points to the contradiction among those who claim brahminical status currently, since they indulged in brutalities against fellow beings in the past and in the present through caste hierarchy. In the same manner, Thass unpacks the category Parayar by rejecting their status as lower castes. Instead he views them as Buddhists who spoke against the pseudo-brahmins' masquerades, therefore, they were actually those-who-spoke (*paraintavarkal*) in this perspective, not necessarily of any particular caste,

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<sup>71</sup> This is evident in the European Catholic missionaries such as Beschi and Nobili mimicking the brahmins by not only wearing sacred thread and dresses but also audaciously claimed that they were "European brahmins." See Stuart Balckburn, *Print, Folklore, Nationalism in Colonial South India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003).

untouchable at that. However, he admits their current subjugated conditions as the result of brahminical oppression and denigration.

What does this unconventional reading of *jati* points to? Clearly Thass is down playing the connoted meanings of many caste terms that are prevalent in the Indian society, that structure people in privilege and deprivation. Instead of taking them at face value, Thass investigates the etymological bases of these caste terms. The fact that caste terms, such as *jati*, are also used in non-caste contexts among Tamils only lends the opportunity and credibility for Thass's alternative readings of these terms. Thass, thus, engages in providing denotational meanings behind the caste terms that are for him only a later corruption, master minded by the privileged groups such as brahmins. Thass's denotational emphases, as against connotational practices, are further analyzed in chapter two. It is difficult to believe that Thass's counter reading of caste terms would have changed the upper caste discourses of caste. However, it could unsettle the upper caste centered understating of terms that circumscribed the social relations and conditions of people, especially the marginalized such as Parayars.

Still the explanation that the Parayars were originally Buddhists would puzzle the readers of *The Tamilan* and would require more convincing details. Thass, therefore, addresses this in a variety of ways. One of which is his article in *The Tamilan* about the identity of the people who were currently called Parayars then.

### **Who are Parayars?**

The section "Within Swadesism" (*swadesaseertirutattul*) that is serialized in *The Tamilan* for many months is to criticise casteism within the Indian freedom movement. More importantly, here Thass sets out to write, between January 6, 1909 and February 3, 1909, about

the history of the people categorized as Parayars. Under the title “The details of how the South Indian Dravidian Buddhists were oppressed as Tiyar and Parayar” Thass writes that the *milechar* (interchangeably he means by this term foreigners or Aryans) occupied the Buddhist Viharas (*buddhaviyarankal*) by dispossessing the kings and Buddhist communities by their deceit.<sup>72</sup> On the other hand, the Buddhists, who were the learned (*kalainoolvalla sankattorkal*), the talented mathematicians (*kanitavalla saakiyarkal*), the descendants of the poet Valluvar (*valluvarkal*), and poets (*paanarkal*), however, did not hesitate to take on the Aryans in retribution, he writes. For instance, the Buddhists chased away the Aryans, who entered their villages, away and cleansed them with cow-dung water (a traditional way of cleansing the un-metaleed streets) and broke the pots of cow-dung water on path along which they came to the village. Since these Buddhists continued to speak against the trickery of the foreigners (*paraayarkalagaveiruntukondu*), the latter dubbed those Buddhists who spoke in rough-Tamil (*koduntamil*) and lived in the hills as Tiyars (literally this would mean those who are dangerous), and those who spoke chaste-Tamil (*sentamil*) as Parayars. Furthermore, Thass says, whenever people asked why these Aryans were running away from the Buddhists they hid the truth of fearing the latter’s resentment, instead announced that they were running away since the Buddhists were “Tiyar, Parayar, and lower castes, therefore, they are untouchables.” For Thass, this early Buddhist history of people preceding the arrival of brahmins in South India, and its decimation thereafter, is the most important reason for the animosity between the Buddhists i.e., the Parayars, and the brahmins, and the latter’s imposition of untouchability on the Parayars.<sup>73</sup>

In the next part, Thass continues this narrative by writing that the Buddhists’ act of exposing “the foreigners” could have succeeded had the indigenous linguistic communities not

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<sup>72</sup> A detailed discussion about *milecharkal* is in the next chapter.

<sup>73</sup> T January 6, 1909.

fallen for the entrapment of the pseudo-brahmins's prosperity and the ignorant kings had not accorded any recognition to the brahmins. He thus notes that the Andhra, Kannada, Marashtaka [sic] and Dravida linguistic groups mimicked the foreign-pseudo-brahmins (*milechaveshapiraminarkal*) to become the indigenous-pseudo-brahmins (*itesaveshapiraminarkal*), and further that the latter were riven with rivalry and hatred among themselves to the level of not dining with each other or exchanging marital women and men among themselves. However, Thass points out that these linguistic communities were all in unison and joined hands to denigrate the Buddhists as Tiyar, Parayars, and lower castes, since the latter dared to speak against them.<sup>74</sup>

In this part, Thass attempts to explicate how brahminism and casteism took roots in India, particularly by keeping the Buddhists as the Other. He cites Tamil works such as *pinkalinigandu*, *mooturai*, *avirotavuntiyar*, and *tiruvasakam* that discuss about the meaninglessness of categories, such as Parayar, etc., as the supportive evidence for his thesis.

Titling his January 20, 1909 essay as "The details of caste leaders spreading the term Parayar," Thass writes that the foreign-pseudo-brahmins were determined that only after the Buddhists were permanently tarnished as Parayars and as members of a lower caste did their fakery and profiteering were established. The foreign-pseudo-brahmins strategized therefore, he says, by joining hands with the indigenous-pseudo-brahmins to name fair birds and animals after them, dark ones after the Parayars. Through this discriminating distinction, of fair and dark, they wanted their communities and chieftains to emulate this dichotomy idealized their supposed highness and the Parayar's lowness.<sup>75</sup> Eventually they retained such animal based distinctions

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<sup>74</sup> T January 13 1909.

<sup>75</sup> The western philologists, like the missionaries such as Beschi, have also contributed to seeing the *pariah qua pariah*, as the lowly dichotomous opposite of the brahmin, even as they refute

only for the Dravidian Buddhists i.e., the Parayars, since representing themselves by certain animals and birds were considered shameful but deemed necessary for the humiliation of the Buddhists. As Thass explains, the pseudo-brahmins, thus, not only created pariah dog, pariah kite, pariah snake, and pariah mynah,<sup>76</sup> but also invented mythologies such as Harichandra and Nandan by converting the Buddhists into Parayar devotees of their gods and made the uneducated and gullible believe in their stories.

Furthermore in this piece Thass writes that the modern pseudo-brahmins who were advisors in the making (*elututaviyorayiruntavarkal*) of the Rev. J. P. Rottler dictionary<sup>77</sup> were also responsible for the fictitious inclusion of thirteen types of Parayars to mortify the Buddhists.<sup>78</sup> They were: 1) Valluvarai, 2) Tataparai, 3) Tankalanparai, 4) Tursaliparai, 5) Kuliparai, 6) Teeparai, 7) Murasuparai, 8) Ambupparai, 9) Vadukappari, 10) Aaliyappari, 11) Valipparai, 12) Vettiyarapparai, 13) Koliyapparai. The pseudo-brahmins, however, as Thass points out, did not talk about their own divisions, since that would mean their adding more facial features to Brahma (because they claimed that they had descended from the god Brahma), an admission which would demystify their various claims, past and present. In addition, Thass says

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“unmixed blood” or “purest blood” among races and linguistic communities. See Max Muller, F. M. *The Biographies of Words and the Home of the Aryas*, (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1912), 95.

<sup>76</sup> Even today Oxford, Webster, and other dictionaries continue to print such derogatory usages. The word *pariah* is in circulation among English speakers including academics and journalists who are careful to avoid such terms like *nigger* for ethical reasons. The Tamil Dalits resent such English usages, which continue to denigrate and reinscribe them in caste terms. There is also a movement among them to remove such terms from the dictionaries.

<sup>77</sup> Rottler’s Tamil to English dictionary was originally published by Vepey Mission Press, Madras in 1834-1841.

<sup>78</sup> Regarding such instances during colonialism in India, particularly the association of brahmins in the making of Mckenzie collection of manuscripts in South India, Dirks says, “Not only were Brahmans important court officials (as well as priests) but many of trusted Mackenzie’s trusted Indian assistants were Brahmans, and when they went out collecting local texts and traditions they invariably began their search by contacting local Brahmans.” See Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 94.



in this writing that since even school children resisted the category Parayar, the British changed it to Panchamar (meaning followers of five Buddhist principles) instead; but the pseudo-brahmins, worrying that their hard effort to outrage the Buddhists as Parayars would disappear, continued to name the streets where the Buddhists lived as Parayar-ghetto-street (*parayarcheriveeti*). For instance, the Mayilapur Venakata Chala Mudali Street was turned into Venekata Chala Mudali Paraicheri Veeti. Thass concludes by noting that only when opposed by those who were alert to it was the name changed back to its original, but that wherever it was not questioned such practices continued to impose the name paraicheri as a term to mark the excluded living space of the Parayars.

In the *Tamilan* of January 27, 1909, Thass elaborated on the brahminical fabrication of lower caste Parayars using couplets from the Tamil literature Munkalai Divakaram, “valluva sakyars are the custodians of right conduct among the kings...” and Sivakasintamani, which refers to the recognition of Valluvar’s ethics and advisory role in society through his work Tirukural (which Thass writes as *Tirikkural*, explaining that it is coexistence with the Buddhist canon *Tiripitakas*). Here Thass says, since the pseudo-brahmins appropriated such guru status from the Buddhists (who were known as Valluva Sakyar or Sakya Valluvar or simply Sakyar or Valluvar) the latter (Buddhists) worked for the removal of the former (pseudo-Brahmins) from the country. Understanding their precarious status the pseudo-brahmins found ways to counter the Buddhist efforts to expose them. One of which, he explains, how the pseudo-brahmins have worked with the Western immigrants to denigrate the Valluvars as the first Parayar in English works, including dictionaries such as Rottler. He argues that the absence of Parayar category of people in any of the Tamil literatures, including lexicons, grammar texts, and epics, or in the

pseudo-brahmin's fake-literature (*veshapiraminarkalin kattukkataikal*) only proves his contention.

Thass continues that unlike what it was under Islamic rule, the British investigated the oppression of the lower castes, especially after the British official Ellis published Tirukural and other Tamil literary works authored by those who have been marginalized by the pseudo-brahmins, as Parayars. Since the ethics contained in Nayanar's Tirukural was unparalleled in the Vedas or the Smiritis (Hindu / brahminical religious texts), it helped counter the pseudo-brahmins' account of the lower castes and Parayars. It is for this reason, he insists, that these imposters fabricated a story that Nayanar, the author of Tirukural, was born to a brahmin male and a Parayar woman named Aati. Thass concludes this part by reminding the readers of Tamilan that this is what Sivarama Sastri, the Tanjavur brahmin, reiterated against the Parayars at the Madras Maha Sabha in 1892 in order to denigrate by depriving their claim to Tiruvalluvar as a Parayar.

In the next edition, on February 3, 1909, Thass follows the earlier piece by stating that he made Sivarama Sastri, the brahmin member of Madras Mahajana Sabha who said that the learned among the Parayars are so because of their brahminical paternity, "sit speechless," by asking "if that is his opinion about the Parayars, how come the Parayars are able to earn BAs and MAs and other prestigious degrees, and to whom were they born? Likewise, to whom were those brahmins who languish in jail born?" Thass views that it is only to amass selfish gains that the upper caste brahmins had elevated themselves by denigrating the noble. Dravidian Buddhists as lower caste and Parayars. The Manudharma Shastra, the Hindu text, only serves to legitimize the pseudo-brahmins through denigration of the Buddhists, he writes. Thass denounces the Shastra as yet another fabrication of those who claim themselves to be brahmins by pointing

three things: a) that there is no answer if one asks what is the Sanskrit source of Tamil translation for Parayars, b) that it has reviled agriculture as a menial profession and thus contributed to ruining food production and causing inflation, and c) that since the Buddhists have always cherished agriculture as their primary way of life, they were maligned as Parayars and as menials. Such falsifications by their oppressors through their religious texts, such as the Shastras, are the reasons why the Buddhists were denied basic amenities such as clean water to drink, wash, and bathe in real life, in order to marginalize them as unclean or impure people and to ghettoize them in sequestered areas called *cheris* in villages. This is also the reason why those who were classified as Parayar and members of lower castes were denied temple-entry. Indeed, Thass contends that many of the temples were actually Buddhist Viharas seized and sequestered by the pseudo-brahmins. The Dravidian Buddhists had to be denied entry into those temples by calling them Parayars and lower castes, as menials, as impure, so that their Buddhist past and their connections with the temples remain hidden.<sup>79</sup>

Thass's articles on Parayars adopt narrative strategies that connect the past with the present by posing questions, finding answers, referring to works in literature, examining brahminical texts in Sanskrit and Tamil, analyzing the impact of caste on agriculture, and refuting the notions of impurity and menial status of the marginalized and their professions. He does not at any moment concede the superiority of those who claim themselves as brahmins, as upper castes, in knowledge and ethics. Instead, the reader of *Tamilan* experiences the unsettling views about the marginalized through a critical examination of what is presumed as the history of the 'Hindu' or Indian society and might come to the conclusions that the Parayars are Parayars

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<sup>79</sup> *T* February 10, 1909.

only because of the machinations of those who call themselves the brahmins and not because of the follies of their own.

In fact, *The Tamilar* by portraying that the lower castes and Parayars have an independent history as Buddhists insist that it is in unpacking their history as Buddhists that they will not only come to know the brahminical damages of their society, but also reclaim their identity as Buddhists.<sup>80</sup> Thass reverses the gaze, thus, on the brahmins and their history from the point of view of the Parayars i.e., the Buddhists.

In this context, it is clear that Thass's indictment of the brahmins heavily relies on the theory of Aryan invasion in India. While Thass is familiar with Caldwell and others who spearheaded Aryan and Dravidian "ethnolinguistic" differences, he attempts to give validity to this perception through more complex interpretation. Even as he emphasizes brahmins as Aryan invaders into the sub-continent and into the land of the Tamils—and this is because he saw them as inventors of caste discrimination—, Thass does not concede Sanskrit as the language of the brahmins/Aryans and Tamil as the language of the Dravidian stock, as Caldwell and other Oriental ethnologists and philologists did. Instead for Thass both Sanskrit and Tamil are sister languages of Buddhist origin, with Pali as their common source.<sup>81</sup>

Thass's thesis that there are anti-caste and Tamil Buddhist texts that have been authored by Parayars might be valid, given the absence of glorification of brahminical / caste aspects in these texts, which also confirm their non-upper caste authorship. However, the readers of *The Tamilar* agreeing ideationally with this understanding of Thass they would have still anticipated

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<sup>80</sup> *T* January 8, 1908.

<sup>81</sup> For a critical reading of Caldwell's Aryan-Dravidian notions see Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 134-144.

more substantiation. This is more so to point out the Tamil Buddhist texts' direct connections with communities, such as Parayars, that are viewed to stand against caste.

On the other hand, Thass's reliance on pre-modern Tamil texts, especially Buddhist ones (such as Manimekalai), which are embedded in the socio-cultural and spatial domains of the Tamils, gives him the wherewithal to argue his case convincingly. Notably, barring the colonial officials who were involved in printing some of them Tamil texts such as Tirukural, Manimekalai, and others that Thass amply referred to had their own indigenous publishers and commentaries and hence did not rely on Orientalist edification.

However, the readers might still not understand the ambiguities involved in Thass's distinction of pseudo-brahmins and real-brahmins, since there is, on the one hand, an apparent rejection of brahmins and brahminism, while retaining these same categories under a positive light—thus, one can see that Thass is making critical examination of literary works that romanticized and legitimized caste hierarchy and discrimination by privileging the brahmins, on the one hand, and at the same time he is providing an alternate reading of these works, on the other. As if to clarify his position Thass writes about a non-caste notion of anyone becoming and being a brahmin while condemning the exploitative nature of existing brahmins in a six-part series titled pseudo-brahmins' Vedas.<sup>82</sup>

### **Pseudo-brahmins' Vedas**

Reiterating his views on who is a brahmin, Thass says that only those who embodied compassion and detachment in life and lived for others attain consciousness of Buddha

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<sup>82</sup> These sections are also testament to Thass's treatment of "the brahmin" category in non-dichotomous ways, even as he repudiates its caste embellishments and preponderance over other communities.

(*samananilai*) and were called the learned as Bimmanan/Arahant in Pali, Brahmanan in Sanskrit, and Antanan in Tamil. *Tirukural*, *nanapotam*, *kaivalyam*, and *pattinattaar* are the Tamil works that serve as his sources of explication. Having stated this he begins his criticism of caste-brahmins and their claims to spirituality, and the sources associated with their ascendance in a six part series entitled *veshapiramina vedantam* (pseudo-brahmins' Vedanta) from July 22, 1908 to August 26, 1908.

In contrast to the Buddhist notion of being a brahmin, as said before, Thass criticizes the irony of those who claim themselves to be brahmins but indulge in a big family, and gain material prosperity by glorifying their own caste-community while denigrating others. Such people due to their covetousness do not hesitate to destroy many families so that their own could prosper, Thass says. These qualities make what he calls pseudo-brahminism (*veshapiramanam*). It is these pseudo-brahmins he holds responsible for falsifying the true meaning of the *four varnas* according to which those who were known through their peaceful minds were brahmins, those known for their bodily power were Kshatriyar, through known to involve themselves in material exchange as Vaishyar, and those known for their industry in agriculture and handicraft as Sootirarkal, and to whose names are added the varna (caste) indicating suffixes of Sharma, Verma, and Buthi—does not refer to any suffix for the fourth varna. Pointing again, the Hindu religious text Manudharma Smiriti as a source of this caste dividing fiction, Thass dissects its contents for valorizing the self-centered aggrandizement of caste-brahmins, particularly against the lowermost varna/caste, the Sootirarkal i.e., those who work the land and live by manual labor.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> T July 22, 1908.

In the second part of the series on “Pseudo-brahmin Vedas” Thass unpacks the contradictions of the Hindu texts such as Manudharma Smiriti and Parasa Smiriti, which are supposed to legitimize the brahmin status and their living as discriminating brahmins. Stating that the readers might wonder why he is doing it, he says this is to further point out that the pseudo-brahmins do not live by their own scriptural commandments. Thass goes on to ask a series of questions: a) Do brahmins avoid doing businesses in things that Manu prohibits? b) Though Manu says that there are no more than five varnas/castes at one point, yet thirty seven more are mentioned elsewhere, but are there such castes existing in reality? c) Why are even the instructions regarding the caste suffix behind the three varnas/castes not followed among them? d) Do they actually follow the injunction in this book that brahmins should wear only cotton sacred thread, kshatriyar should wear only jute sacred thread, and the vaishyar should wear only a scared thread made of white-goat hair?<sup>84</sup>

The questions that Thass posed against the proliferation of castes, caste suffixes, the brahmins assuming the power to codify, the contradictions between the varna/caste codification and practices in real life are pointed and could have engaged *The Tamilan* readers. However, Thass still appears to subscribe to an ideational theory of division of labor of varna/caste antecedent to its later corruption into discriminatory segmentation. This remains a conjectural explanation of varna/caste unsubstantiated by historical anthropological evidences, which could confirm a consensual and horizontal *varna/caste contract* among all the participant groups/categories—akin to a guild system.

Continuing his investigation of Manu in the next part, Thass says, if the brahmins emerged from the face of their god brahma, since they are born from elsewhere today, do they

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<sup>84</sup> *T* July 29, 1908.

actually know where they are actually born from. If not, then they are pseudo-brahmins by their own admission and contra Manu. Likewise, since the brahmins changed professional names into caste names and since people do not follow what is stipulated in their scriptures, their theory and practice are not real anymore. Reiterating that real-brahmins in the Buddhist sense do not exist in India anymore, Thass says, he examines the real and pseudo-brahmins only to unmask those who claim the highest caste status by oppressing the Tamils who are the original inhabitants and Dravidian Buddhists (*poorvakudikalum diravida pautarkalumakiya tamilarkalai*) as lower caste Parayars. Significantly he adds that he raises these questions to further ask whether the brahmins deserve to assume that they belong to the uppermost caste by consigning the Parayars to lower caste.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, Thass rejects the supposed sanctity of Vedas and Upanishads, by probing Vedic myths such as the sudden birth of humans from animals, and the celebration of unethical practices such as stealing, debauchery, and alcoholism.<sup>86</sup>

In the next episode, Thass critically investigates the very making of Vedas. For him neither Sankarachari, nor Ramanujachari, nor Madhavachari (the intellectual founders of three branches of brahmins and which are used by brahmins themselves as their own names) preserved the Rigveda, the Yajurveda, the Samaveda, and the Atharvaveda; nor were the Vedas preserved by any community in any Mutts (ashrams / hermitages) on copper plates and other kinds of historical records. Instead, he explains that when the British arrived in India they enquired from the pseudo-brahmins whether they had any record of their antiquities, since they had proclaimed themselves as the highest of all castes. That is how, Thass says, one Parsi gentleman, Tarashiko, gave whatever little bit that was in the Parsi language (*paarishupaashai*), which was later published at a Calcutta exhibition. Furthermore he adds, “With the Parsi community

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<sup>85</sup> *T* August 5, 1908.

<sup>86</sup> *T* August 5, 1908.



(*paarishusaatiyar*)”—true to his principle he names the linguistic community as *saatiyar*—“Tarashiko’s half vedic-stories (*vedakkataikaludan*), the pseudo-brahmins added the Buddha Dhamma and gave some to Colonel Follier, some to Sir. Robert Chambers, some to General Martin, some to Sir William Jones, and some to Colebrook. These British not only translated whatever the imposters gave from Sanskrit to English, but also printed and produced them as books, which would be represented thereafter as Hindus’ Vedas.”<sup>87</sup>

In order to substantiate his claim that Buddhist aspects have been incorporated into the Vedas, Thass points out that the pseudo-brahmins have included many of Buddhist names and histories into them. For instance, he says that Indirar (*Indra*) is portrayed as their god meaninglessly. This is to cover the fact that Indirar is Buddha’s name, which refers to him as someone who succeeded in controlling his five-senses.<sup>88</sup> In the same vein, Thass elaborates that going by the historical accounts one could see that six hundred years before and seven hundred years after Christ, Buddhism had spread in India, and historical records attest to the fact that no other religion had prevailed as it had. Further, the emergence of Hindu religions, Vaishnavism and Saivism, is disputable because of their imitating Buddhist history and practices, he says. While acknowledging that there are views that these pseudo-brahmins were present during Buddha’s times, Thass however emphatically denies them as lies. As far as he was concerned, the pseudo-brahmins had fabricated stories that the Buddha had admitted ignorant brahmins into his fold only because they want to claim nativity in India since Buddha’s times, by any means, even by admitting their ignorance and shamelessness.

It is here that Thass takes issue with the role Orientalists played in canonizing brahminism through the Vedas. Examining Max Muller’s view that the Buddha was enlightened

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<sup>87</sup> *T* August 12, 1908.

<sup>88</sup> [aindu (five) + tirar (one who is successful) = Indirar]

by the Upanishads (*upanidatam*), Thass writes that one may ask unless there was a brahmin-religion (*piramanamatam*) then how could this have been possible? For him the lack of clarity about the Buddhist prehistory is the reasons why such issues are raised against Max Muller's theories. He writes, "even though Max Muller is talking without knowing who the (real) brahmins responsible for Vedas and Upanishads, my repeating what he says is tantamount to spreading loose-mouth-stories (*enavaayankataikal*)." Thass concludes his views by saying

Max Muller's commentary is without any understanding of Buddha's language, Buddha's way of life, Buddha's influence on many languages, Buddhist Upanishads and its times, nor has he examined the Buddha Dhamma's antecedents before he made his unsubstantial claims. Should one trust his views and disregard historical evidences, copper plates, and records. Never.<sup>89</sup>

Having written about the context in which the Vedas arose and got legitimized as brahmanical religious texts, Thass proceeds to scrutinize their contents. Probing the Rigveda, Thass asks, given the confusing notions of god in it, "if anyone follows it what should one believe, the god or Brahma or the mendicants or fire or air or Sun or the snake that swallows the Sun? It is not clear who benefited what by believing in any of these?" Likewise, finding *brahmum* (consciousness) interpreted in multiple ways in Yajurveda he asks, "if happiness is brahmum, knowledge is brahmum, life is brahmum, breath is brahmum, body is brahmum, food is brahmum, then, brahmum becomes a meaningless creature. In what ways would it help people's lives?" he further asks.<sup>90</sup> Likewise, Thass finds fault in the way Samaveda mystifies *aatma* (life) by linking it to the sky, sand, air, and the Sun, thus not benefitting the everyday lives of people.<sup>91</sup> In the final part of the series on "pseudo-brahmins' Vedas," Thass begins to analyze the contents of the Upanishads by pointing out to its interconnections with the Vedas and the

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<sup>89</sup> T August 19, 1908.

<sup>90</sup> T August 19, 1908.

<sup>91</sup> T August 19, 1908.

ambiguous state of its existence, i.e., its not having any independent value apart from the Vedas. Arguing that true to its mirroring of the details of Vedas, Thass says that the Upanishads too do not provide any concrete view of either *brahmum* nor *aatma*, thus, making them mysterious to people who would like to practice this religion. He censures the Upanishads, therefore, by saying “given its fatuousness one may call it a madman’s song (*paitiyakkaaran paattu*).” Thass is trying to make sure that his position is not a cynical rejection when he explains his reasons for berating the brahmins that “they do not know the details of the Vedas but pretend to be gurus of the Vedas; while not knowing the top and bottom of *brahmum* and *aatma* they insist that others can learn about them from them; if you press them they will say that brahmum is everywhere; however, as if it is not among the Parayar as an exception, the brahmins ghettoize the Parayars.”<sup>92</sup>

Thass exhorts, thus, that one should follow neither these pseudo-brahmins nor the pseudo-spiritualists who are their descendants. Instead one should learn from those who speak the truth as they see it. One should approach those who display non-discriminating tendencies in learning (*attuvida visaranai purushar*), that is, by birth, family, and caste, and mix of love and humane acts. Furthermore, Thass says, one should look for historical literature of the people with erudition, and strive to disseminate ethical values that would stand for the progress of all. Such dissemination is important, he concludes, to nourish the hope of a person with true wisdom not only to transform the world but also to dispel dissembling among people in order to pursue genuine humanism (*satyatanmum*).

Thass’s critical investigation of Hindu scriptures such as the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Shastras opened many questions that were not popularly raised till then (in this aspect he

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<sup>92</sup> T August 26, 1908.

anticipates other critics including Ambedkar). The power that the brahmins could gain through Hindu scriptures to discriminate non-brahmins and marginalize the Buddhists as Parayars are exposed by pointing out the inconsistencies and contradictions within them. Anything that is remotely brahminical is rejected firmly by Thass as deeply dehumanizing and anti-social. Significantly, he criticizes in subtle and direct ways, the collusion between the Orientalists and the brahmins that gave a new lease of life to the latter (brahmins) by making the brahmin the quintessence of being Hindu, and turning brahminism into Hinduism.<sup>93</sup> This is also in contrast to missionaries, ironically and deceptively, recruiting Tamils in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) by providing “education in the vedic foundations of Hinduism, on the basis of the Orientalist reconstruction of it” in the second quarter of nineteenth century<sup>94</sup>

Examining the relations between brahmins and religions, Thass writes that the brahmins have invented new religions (*nootana-madankalai*) in order to prosper materially and they have invented new castes (*nootana-saatikalai*) in order to elevate themselves by oppressing and ruling others (*matravarkalai adakki aalum*). Unambiguously, he connects all non-brahmins as the victim of brahmins when he says,

apart from disparaging the Dravidian Buddhists who were against their invented religions and castes as lower castes and Parayars, when the Mudali, Naidu, and Chetti [the non-brahmin upper castes] convert to Christianity they will be dubbed as someone who has become a Parayar because of conversion. By such strategies they (brahmins) could retain their prosperous-religion (*seevana-matankal*) and caste authority (*adikara-saati*) by denigrating other religions as lower caste ones.

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<sup>93</sup> Thass has a complex relation with the Orientalists when he talks about Buddhism. The details are in the second chapter.

<sup>94</sup> For a critical investigation of the relationship between the missionaries and caste groups such as bahmins and vellalas in Sri Lanka see R. F. Young and S. Jebanesan, *The Bible Trembled: The Hindu-Christian Controversies of Nineteenth-Century Ceylon*, (Vienna: Institute of Indology, 1995), 70

As an instance to point out the double-speak among the brahmins, Thass writes that when a brahmin goes to jail or prison for lies, theft, alcoholism, prostitution, and murder he would have adapted to changes that would require him to disregard his caste and religion [since he will not be able to preserve his orthopraxy in jail or prison conditions and becomes an inmate just like all the others], but when he is released from prison a visit to “their temple” and the performance of the appropriate rituals could win back all the religious and caste privileges that he lost as a criminal. Whereas others, he continues, when they leave Siva for Christ or Vishnu for Christ they become Parayars for the brahmins. Thass thus concludes that the brahmins use religions in order to sustain their castes, and vice-versa while they offend others as lowly when they leave their religions and castes.

Thass’s dissections of Vedas and brahmins’ upholding them as their brainchild of immense value would provoke the reader to view them critically, particularly by his rejection of the Vedas as “madman’s songs.” However, beyond the weaknesses of the Vedic concepts such as *brahman* and *aatma* that Thass points to as non-inclusive, the readers of *The Tamilar* could have also anticipated his investigation of social relations codified in the Vedas that materially benefit the brahmins by hierarchically subordinating the other groups. This inadequacy does not undercut his main thesis that the Hindu scriptures fundamentally favor the brahmins and leave the non-brahmins, especially the Parayars, as mute spectators of brahminical performances in religion and society. In fact, apart from writing about the Vedas and the ascendance of the pseudo-brahmins in Indian history, Thass analyses the present conditions of caste that favor the brahmins.

## Repudiation of Brahminical Practices and Institutions

Investigating the bases of brahminical power Thass inquires into professions that the brahmins traditionally claim entitlements to as well as that were conferred on them by the colonial government. Radically opposing their exclusionary living through caste, he calls the brahmins as those who are pseudo and live by begging (*pitchaiirantunporkal*) in two ways: they claim that they are entitled to charity because the Vedas command so, and by mastering Sanskrit slogans they legitimized “authoritative begging” (*adikarappitchai*). The pseudo-brahmins’ trickery gained permissibility not among the educated but among the gullible and uneducated villagers, Thass explains.<sup>95</sup>

Furthermore, Thass finds the ascendance of the brahmins in the colonial administration seamless. That is, the traditional-ritual-caste-power gave way to the colonial-administrative-caste-power, and entitlement of brahmins to vast swaths of land through the positions they held, a process which for Thass had enormous consequences for others. No wonder then that Thass produces a criticism of various colonial policies, including land distribution, which favored those who already had lands such as Zamindar, Mittadar, and Mirasudar.<sup>96</sup> Against such policies he appeals to the British to distribute land to those who work the land, produce food for all, but remain poor. Thass writes about the irony of distributing land to those who claim themselves to belong to the upper castes:

Because of the recent invention called caste discrimination and its dehumanizing tendencies the prosperity of agricultural production has come to an end. For it is said that those who live by begging are big castes (*pitchaiiraitubavan peria-saati*), whereas those who work the land are called small castes (*ulutunbavan siriya-saati*). Since those who till the land and labor hard are oppressed as lower castes, the indignities of agricultural labor have impacted agricultural production and poverty.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> *T* October 12, 1910.

<sup>96</sup> Non-brahmin upper castes too were holding such positions.

<sup>97</sup> *T* October 19, 1910.

It is important to note here that the coming together of colonialism and caste is questioned in Thass's writings. He not only shuns colonial policies, such as land distribution, which favored those who identified themselves as upper castes by discriminating other Indians as lower castes, but also spurns the establishment of Indian organizations that gave scope to the higher castes to be the beneficiaries of power from and against colonialism. In this regard Thass's views on Indian National Congress, and the people and media associated with it stand out as instances.

In a revealing write up, Thass questions the significance of the Indian National Congress by reproducing "the Public Welfare Memorandum" (*potunalavinnappam*) that he submitted to the Congress in December 21, 1891.<sup>98</sup> Detailing the origins of the memorandum, Thass says that when they assembled for the first time the Congress said that it would petition the British to redress the demands of people irrespective of caste and religion. Trusting it, Thass adds, the "casteless Dravidians" met in Nilgiris and put together a set of ten demands under the title Public Welfare Memoranda (the details of every demand will be discussed in chapter 3. For the purpose at hand only the introduction and the first demand are discussed). the introduction to the 1891 memorandum, Thass points out that the modern emergence of caste is the result of converting the age-old professions into mutually exclusive vocational groups. For him the caste-names ironically could actually be applied to all people, since many groups share features (though not all features) that are claimed exclusively by one.

Explaining along the lines we saw before, the Tamil etymological aspects and linguistic meanings of the terms *saatippor* as one who performs or accomplishes and *saatiyaar* referring to a group or section of people in the general sense, not *jati* or caste sense, Thass says that what is

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<sup>98</sup> T October 14, 1908.

portrayed as a derogatory term, “Parayan,” likewise refers to paraiyan in the general sense to anyone who speaks (parai refers to the verb speak), and to anyone who plays a drum (Parai also refers to a percussion instrument similar to the Native Americans / First Nations’ drum). Arguing that since all the above terms i.e., *saatippor* (performers or those who accomplish), *saatiyaar* (sections of people), and *paraiyan* (one who speaks) have primarily non-caste meanings originally—though they have assumed caste-sense now predominantly—, Thass emphasizes that there is no base in calling those who are classified as Parayars as lower castes (*taltasaatiyor*), and others calling them so is a travesty (*akkiramum*) and lacking evidence historically.<sup>99</sup>

No wonder with such an introduction to the memorandum of 1891, the first demand is for the removal of calling somebody Parayan derogatorily. Since there are educated and prosperous people among those who suffer such a categorization as Parayar, Thass says, it is done to damage the persona and life of those targeted. Therefore, the memorandum asks for the colonial government to declare through a law that it is a crime to call someone a Parayan.<sup>100</sup>

Since this and the other nine demands for the welfare and rights of the marginalized had not been addressed since 1891, and since only some upper caste sections benefited selfishly through the Congress, Thass asks, “is it right to call this organization Hindu [sic] National Congress?”<sup>101</sup> Answering in the negative he emphasizes,

going by the beneficiaries of this organization it should be called Bengali Congress (*vankalasaathiyor congress*) or Brahmin Congress (*piraminasaatiyor congress*). Because

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<sup>99</sup> Thass writes about sections of people by their actions, such as *niyayasaatiyar*, those who do good acts and *tiyasaatiyar*, those who do destructive acts.

<sup>100</sup> Probably Thass pioneers this initiative, which finally becomes a law in the constitution of India in 1950 in the form of Article 17, which prohibits untouchability.

<sup>101</sup> Thass writes they were sixty lakhs (six millions) i.e., one in six of the Tamil speaking population then.



such people negotiate only their demands with the British, and do not care for the casteless Muslims and Dravidians, it does not matter whether they exist in this nation or not. No wonder they have split into moderates and extremists.

Thass's pointing to the "educated" and "prosperous" among the Parayars and the redundancy of calling them as "Parayan" might point to his proclivities for rank consciousness among the marginalized. However, his stand against the very category Parayan and other caste divisions and his openness to the participation of Muslims along with the oppressed caste groups demonstrate his inclusive anti-caste politics.

Sensing that efforts are being made to mend the fences between the moderates and extremists in the Congress, Thass skeptically dismisses such an effort as a waste of money, and says that such sections coming together do not guarantee anything for the poor, instead it will create more problems. As for the members of Congress, he declares, "since they do not care for the poor, people say should one care whether they are alive or dead (*yiruntenna poyennaenum perunkuchalaiyirukkinrathu*). Moreover, as the meetings have become wasteful and the swadeshis have split into moderates and extremists, and both groups have indulged in more violence, it is better to disband the Congress."<sup>102</sup> Mocking the split in the Congress, as moderates and extremists, in the title "Like the castes split into 1008 forms, should the Congress split?" Thass reiterates his view that the two conferences in Nagpur (1908) and Chennai (1909) should be called the meetings of Bengali Congress and Brahmin Congress respectively, instead of National Congress. Questioning the movement against Curzon's division of Bengal, Thass dismisses it saying "[since] we cannot correct our corruption and lack of integrity among

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<sup>102</sup> T October 14, 1908.

ourselves it is a waste to talk about the division of Bengal, and the moderates and extremists are bound to split further among themselves.”<sup>103</sup>

Reacting to the news that the Chennai Congress meeting might discuss the welfare of Parayars, Thass observes that such talks are meant only for the media and public speeches. Instead, he prefers that the Congress and others at least not harm the Parayars anymore. That is, he wants them to not prevent the Parayars from drinking water from the public wells and ponds, to let the service of washermen and barbers existing for everyone so that they too could live like anybody else and move freely, to feed them their full wages instead of starving them to death, and above all to let their identity be declared as Buddhists instead of oppressing the original Buddhists (*poorvabauta kudikal*) as Parayars.

Thass’s general disdain for the Congress for functioning as an organization of and for upper castes gets sharpened against its extremist faction, which promoted violence against the British and called for *swaraj* (self-rule). Particularly Tilak, the most influential leader of the extremist faction of the Congress, comes under his scrutiny. Viewing that the extremists’ actions have been shameful (*avamanatirkullaakivitatu*), he rejects Tilak’s credentials as a leader by asking a series of questions:

[H]ow far does he know the problems of his fellow citizens, and what has he done about it? Has he ever worked to remove more than sixty lakhs (six millions) being declared as Parayars? Or, has he ever educated those who oppress the Parayars by preventing them from drinking water from public facilities, and using the service of washermen and barbers? Has he ever exposed that the brahmins do not talk about caste wherever they are in dominance and make money, but discriminate Parayars in the name of caste wherever they seek to work? Has he prevented the migration of poor people to other nations [indentured labor] by working for the distribution of land and money, so that agriculture in India flourishes by which the need to go outside one’s country does not arise, so that the poor can not only overcome poverty but also help produce more food for this nation? Has he ever done anything about the practice of giving five rupees and keeping the laborer bonded for six months or giving half-a-measure of paddy to exploit

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<sup>103</sup> T December 16, 1908.

the laborer the whole day? Could he bring sense to the casteists who out of spite ruin the crops of the Dravidian Buddhists [preventing irrigation and land grabbing] who eke out their living from the soil?

For all these questions, Thass finds Tilak in the negative. Furthermore, he cautions people that following the swadesis (those who advocate indigenization as against the British/European imports) would ruin them (*swadesi seerkedarin vaakkai nambi seerkedum*). Using the metaphor of plague contagion and its removal from public by quarantine, Thass thus supports the arrest of Tilak and deportation as much as the arrest of Chidamparam Pillai and Subramniya Siva in Tutukudi and Tirunelveli.<sup>104</sup>

While it might be naive to hold Tilak responsible for caste practices and its consequences, Thass was aware of the significance he was gaining as a radical leader among the Congress self-rulers, almost all of who were members of upper castes. True to such membership, the Congress members, moderates and extremists put together, never demonstrated any inclination for the removal of casteism leading and to establish egalitarianism among all Indians. Given the apathy to the subhuman conditions of the Parayars in South India, particularly because of those who claimed to be upper caste indigenizers (*swadesikal*), Thass did not find any merit to their agenda and practices. Rather, he sensed that there was greater scope in expecting the alleviation of the marginalized to come from the British and, ironically only further entrenchment of caste from the nationalist resistance of the swadesis.<sup>105</sup>

Thass's stance against the Congress was also emboldened by the hopes he had on the British for changing the conditions of the lower castes. This is not because of his lack of critical

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<sup>104</sup> *T* July 29, 1908 and August 5, 1908. It is not surprising that Ambedkar also questions Tilak along these lines. For the connections between Max Muller and Tilak's views on cow and stand against beef eaters and Anti-cow Killing Acts (1895) See Tilak, "The Cow's Walk," in *The Arctic Home*, 173-215.

<sup>105</sup> *T* July 5, 1911.

understanding of colonialism or Orientalism.<sup>106</sup> Rather, because the practice of caste by his own countrymen compelled him to look for allies and strategies that would break the upper castes' stranglehold on the majority of Indians. Conversely, the swarajists or self-rulers themselves have had more organic relations with the Europeans than Thass and his other anti-caste cotemporaries. Tilak's notions of Aryan connections between brahmins and Europeans mirrored Max Muller's, and many other Europeans'. More importantly, Europeans such as Annie Besant recognized Tilak's views and gave a lease of life through establishing purportedly Hindu institutions, such as Benares Hindu University, where they could thrive to the exclusion of the "lower castes." Such events speak volumes about the relations between brahmins and some Europeans.<sup>107</sup> However, true to his clarity about his own nativity in South India—unlike Tilak finding a home in the Arctic for the brahmins and Vedas—Thass does not hesitate to write that the Europeans are immigrants (*kudiyerikal*) too like the "pseudo-brahmins." However, he views that the Europeans and brahmins can not be clubbed as one. Thus, he questions the anomaly in the claims of brahmins, such as Tilak, that they and the Europeans are of the same Aryan race. Refuting such claims, Thass mocks by asking if that were the case then why should the *swarajists* bother whether Ram or Lakshmanan rules (the characters from the epic Ramayana) i.e., whether an Indian or an European rules India? Rather the Indians would like to rule even the Europeans, he says. In his usual method of posing questions, Thass rhetorically asks, "if the

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<sup>106</sup> Given the precolonial and colonial caste conditions, the marginalized communities have had more complex relationship with colonial structures and Oriental scholarship. It is rather shortsighted to ask a Dalit woman's commitment for the "Indian Independence Movement" and stand against "Orientalism," either in colonial and post-colonial times, without examining the role of caste and gender in the making of them as a precondition. In fact, the marginalized raising the caste problem has always been scuttled by the upper caste nationalism that suppressed the anti-caste nationalism of the marginalized. See G. Aloysius, *Nationalism Without a Nation in India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>107</sup> For the overlapping interests among brahmins and Europeans see Tilak, *Arctic Home* and Annie Besant, *India: A Nation*, (London: T.C & E. C. Jack, 1915).

brahmins were born from the face of their God Brahma, why have not the Europeans, their kin, been born in the same way? Why don't the Europeans have Manu Dharma Shastra, upper caste brahmin categories or caste arrogance among themselves or avataars that destroyed Buddhism?"<sup>108</sup>

Furthermore, Thass points out the incongruity in the claims of brahmins in India that they have commonalities with the Europeans by stating that the latter do not possess brahminical characteristics; likewise, the brahmins do not have anything worthy of the Europeans.

Comparing the European inventions in transport and communication that are beneficial to non-Europeans as well, Thass asks whether the brahmins have anything that is worthwhile for themselves or for others. He caricatures the brahmins that they have only invented

keeping tuft, placing sacred thread around the ears [while urinating and defecating], checking the age of teeth, insisting cotton for one and woolen sacred thread for others, praying for half-an-hour by standing in the river, declaring that Vedas are not meant for *sootirarkal* (lower caste) and one should not eat in front of the *sootirarkal*, that one should kill Parayars with no sympathy, that they ask for alms on the night of eclipse and other days, that they give life to the gods of sand and rocks, and ask for money without qualms during death anniversaries. The benefits of these inventions could only be reaped after one's death by standing before Siva and Vishnu, the brahmin gods. Since such destructive creations are the mark of upper castes, it is wrong to claim that they and Europeans belong to the same race (*aryavartanatar*). The Hindus and Europeans, thus, will never live together. It is only confirmed by the Hindus' reluctance to join the Europeans in the tramway jobs [due to perceived indignities or inabilities].<sup>109</sup>

Thus Thass rebuffed the claims of commonalities of the upper castes i.e., Hindus with the Europeans, even as they sought to displace the Europeans in power through caste entitlements, which would have only helped their own easy transition into positions of power and privilege while preventing lower caste Indians from competing for the same positions. This could have been possible only by Thass's exposing the unfairness of the upper castes. In addition, Thass

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<sup>108</sup> *T* April 12, 1911.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

standing firmly for the British to open the opportunities only for those who do not have caste prejudices, unlike the brahmins.<sup>110</sup> This is further demonstrated by the stance he took on the conditions of indentured labor in South Africa, and in his call for not allowing the upper castes in positions of power in India.

Examining the letter of one Nanasambanan, published in the newspaper *Sudesamitran*,<sup>111</sup> lamenting that all Indians in South Africa were addressed as coolies (wage laborers) then, Thass says sarcastically that this man should be considered as the epitome of judiciousness. Quoting the writer Thass says that he calls the whites in South Africa as white-skinned-animals (*vellaitolportamirukankal*), and is deeply offended by their calling Indians in general, coolies, instead of calling only the laborers by that designation.<sup>112</sup> In addition, Thass says that the writer complains about the lower castes getting educated and becoming insolent vis-à-vis the upper castes in India. Countering him, Thass poses many questions:

instead of calling those who play drums Parayars, is it right to call those who are astrologers, musicians, the learned, star awardees [British honors], Rai Bahadur awardees [British honor], Ajur Serustha awardees [British honors], registrars, doctors, engineers, businessmen, medicine-men (*poovaisiyar*), and agriculturists as Parayars? Is it that only those who have immigrated to Transvaal should get justice and not those who are the original inhabitants in their own land? How can you consider it an affront when the Transvaalers do not let you on their public transport and streets, but who are responsible for calling the original inhabitants of India, the talented and hardworking, and those who

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<sup>110</sup> In fact, some non-brahmin upper caste leaders in South India had similar views about brahmins taking over from the British. For instance, Vedachalam, alias Marimali Adikal, says, “the Tamils must take note British Government is the only best government which has been directed by Providence to rule impartially over all the Indian peoples who are torn by endless caste distinctions, and irreconcilable racial and religious differences.” See Vedachalam, *Tamilar Matham*, 48

<sup>111</sup> This was founded by an influential brahmin G. Subramani Aiyar, who also started the present daily “The Hindu.” The *Sudesamitran* then, *The Hindu* now, have remained the mouth pieces of the Tamil speaking brahmins.

<sup>112</sup> M. K. Gandhi also had similar views about the *coolies*. See Geoffrey Ward, “Political Pilgrim,” review of *The Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India*, by Joseph Lelyveld, *New York Times*, March 27, 2011, Weekend section.

cultivate the lands ingeniously Parayars? And for preventing the Parayars from availing themselves public sources of water, barbers and laundry services, from walking the streets, and from British government jobs? Don't these oppressed have any one to whom they could address their pathos and who could deliver them justice? Since Nanasambanan advises the Transvaalers on justice but does not care for what happens to his own country's original inhabitants, his laments about the conditions of Indians in Transvaal only reeks of his own selfishness.

Having posed these counter questions Thass makes a radical comment that "it is only because of what they do in India the Indians face a poetic justice in the form of racial discrimination in Transvaal, and as for as their actions in India they will reap what they have sown soon."<sup>113</sup>

Through Thass's tirade against Nanasambanan, he exposes the cruel prejudices of upper castes, especially the brahmins, and how, by contrast, the British developmental works were opening more opportunities to those marginalized by caste and religion in finding a purpose in living. The members of the upper castes have ascended through western education, on the one hand, and through caste-Hindu traditions and prerogatives, on the other; likewise, accumulating wealth through participation in colonial power, on the one hand, and assuming caste-prejudiced representative power in the struggle against colonialism, on the other. However, the relations between the marginalized and the colonial structures are more complex. In other words, the marginalized came to see that Indian nationalism against the colonialists was nothing but upper caste nationalism, the success of which would only guarantee their further ruination.

This was evident in Thass's leader page writing on the self-rulers' demanding appointments in high railway jobs, which begins by saying that only those Indians who deserve should be appointed, that is, those who do not have caste and religious prejudices. Thass says it is due to such policies that Muslims, Anglo-Indians, and the poor, who are the casteless majority

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<sup>113</sup> *T* March 4, 1908.

in India (*saatipetamilla peruntokaikkudigal*) could join the railways and serve so long. However, he warns that if the high positions in railways are given to those who discriminate by caste (*saatipetamulla*) then all those casteless who have been serving so long will be ruined (*nasindupaaladaivatudan*). To substantiate his view Thass re-states an essay that he had published earlier about a tehsildar (lower civil administrative officer) who extended and misused his administrative power to throw out poor families who had occupied the railway car in order to seat his own family. Thass reads this act of the tehsildar as a demonstration of the brute force inherent in the caste system (the upper castes occupied mostly such civil administrative posts). Based on this past experience, Thass says that these “caste-discriminating compassionless group” (*saatipetamulla kaarunyamatra kootattar*), even when not at their jobs in the railways, do not hesitate to display their “caste power” (*periasaatikalennum adikaram*) to the poor. Therefore, it goes without saying that when they are given an opportunity to work at the railways, they will devastate those casteless persons who also work there.

In addition Thass also talks about how upper caste station masters indulge in nepotism in order to keep only their caste members in positions in the railways and kick out those who do not discriminate people by caste. Therefore, he emphatically says that if the upper castes are appointed in high positions in railways then the Muslims, Anglo Indians and the casteless poor will be ruined by the union of caste power and administrative power (*periasaatikalennum adikaratudan peria utiyoka adikaarataiyum petrukkondu*). For these reasons, Thass boldly recommends that those Indians with upper caste names should not be given high positions in the railways, and instead, members of lower castes, who are actually casteless, should be employed there.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> *T* April 5 1911.



Despite Thass's appeals to give positions of power to "the casteless" and to keep the upper castes out, the British never heeded such demands of those who were against caste at that time barring some exceptions. Rather, the British appointed more and more upper caste members in civil and political positions that were to only reinforce the stranglehold of caste forever. Thass was not oblivious to this and did not hesitate to question it. This is clear from Thass's leader page piece titled "the reasons behind poverty and plague," which indicts the British legitimacy for the ascendance of the upper castes. Insightfully Thass observes that through the fusion of caste power and administrative power the upper castes have crippled the poor over a period of time. In a severe indictment of the swadeshis he says that once they realized that they have succeeded in the oppression of other Indians through their caste prejudices, they turned then to usurp British power. In fact he views the meetings of the swadeshis only as "caste-consultation meetings" (*saatialosanai kootankal*) and the followers of such caste-meetings as only the gullible victims of the masqueraders who perpetuate themselves as gods and gurus. This comment shows that Thass is referring more to the brahmins who assume such power.

Even as Thass's criticism of the British employment policies was to expose the intrusion of the upper castes and its deleterious consequences on the communities such as Parayars, his views demonstrate that he was sensitive to the impact of caste on Muslims and Anglo-Indians and their subordination to the upper caste predominance. Believing that the only way out of this subordination of the upper castes was the marginalized having more employment than the upper castes, Thass reposed his confidence in the late-colonialists to implement policies as a counter against the upper castes.

Perspicaciously, however, Thass points out here that had the British followed the Islamic policy of not heeding those who claimed themselves as caste-leaders, then, the upper castes

would have become equal with others without assuming the conceit and the thought that they were upper castes. Instead, “since the space was given [by the British] they constructed caste-lies (*poisaatik kattu*), and believed in their own lies of high status to presume that they are entitled to go up in the administration as well.” Thass reads this rise of the upper castes and their prosperity as the reasons for the impoverishment of the others (the lower castes) and their falling as victims of diseases such as dengue fever and plague due to caste discrimination.<sup>115</sup>

### **Parayar Tolerance and Retribution**

Thass’s position that it was the conspiracy of the brahmins which brought forth the undermining of the dignity of labor, certain knowledge traditions, religion, and history of the Parayars produced critical interpretations from a variety of points of view as we saw above. On the other hand, he also registers his thoughts on the Parayar drawing the limits to caste oppression and the possibility of their radical reaction against it. This ranges from his views on the simmering discontent and tolerance to radical retribution from those who were defamed as Parayars.

In the light of the *swadesis*’ caste consciousness, Thass reiterates that it is those that have ingenuously immigrated (*paraaya saatiyorkal*) to this nation have indulged in menial jobs—priesthood and so on—but have called the Parayars as menial workers, even though they [the Parayars] are the ones who actually work the land as well as serve in high places—such as butlers in European households. Despite the fact that they have suffered, the denial of basic

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<sup>115</sup> *T* October 4, 1911. Thass’s critical writings would have provoked reactions from those who were put on the spot. He responded to such criticisms in an article titled, “Truth Speaker is a Public Enemy” (*etartavadi vekujana viroti*) and asks, “Is it right when those who have immigrated (*kudiyeriyavarkalum*) to this nation (India) and those who are amorphous (*vakaiyatravarkalum*) [the Europeans and the Upper Castes, especially the brahmins] in this nation call the original inhabitants as outcastes (*purasaatiyor*)?” *T* October 19, 1910.

necessities such as clean water, the services of a barber and washermen, and persecution at their places of work, the Parayars have remained tolerant of their abusers for thousand and five-hundred years, he says. This, Thass believes is because of Parayars' conversion to Buddhism, which teaches compassion towards even one's own enemy. However, Thass says there are limits to Parayars' tolerance.

Thass says, for instance, some Parayars have reacted by chasing the brahmins away from villages and cleansing their path with cow-dung water not because of their meaningless enmity to the brahmins. He claims, that the brahmins have destroyed the Parayar's Buddhist organizations, monasteries and their Buddhist way of life. It is only in the interest of protecting their villages and whatever little they may have from the ruination that brahmins are wont to do that they treat the brahmins the way they do.

Nevertheless, true to the saying that those who are oppressed may rise up and the oppressor may go down, Thass says that such a tolerance of brahmanical abuse may not be there forever. Therefore, he concludes that those who are denigrated as Parayars will surely rise, and when they do, even if they do not succeed in avenging the brahmins' actions completely, they will try even at the risk of their lives. And so Thass advises: "if the abusers [the brahmins] mend their ways and foster brotherhood and integrity by breaking the caste barriers among all (*sakala saatiyoraiyum otrumaiyil nerukki*), then, self-education, self-work, self-prosperity, and self-rule will automatically emerge." "If not," Thass warns, "a handful of people will defeat the one who builds and thrives within the barriers of caste and religion."<sup>116</sup> Here Thass entertains the possibilities of radical reaction—though it is not spelt out clearly—of the marginalized if the caste oppressors continue their stranglehold.

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<sup>116</sup> *T* March 18, 1908.

However, elsewhere, metaphorically pointing to the imminence of radical retribution from the Parayars against the upper castes, Thass says, “if they continue to heap indignities on the original Buddhists, without any restraint, without realizing the limit of their tolerance, the oppressed will rise up like a quiet elephant ready to go berserk when troubled, like a tiger hiding to pounce, like a bow bending to launch the arrow, like a goat going back only in order to charge ahead. When they rise up, trying to stop them would be like attempting to build a barrier of haystacks against the ocean’s high tide.” He warns, therefore, that the upper castes should realize the potential of those they call Parayars and mind their shameful behavior (*iliseyalkal*) in order to lead a dignified life themselves. Thass warns that soon one will see the tide of the marginalized turning against the upper castes’ words and deeds.<sup>117</sup>

The reasons behind Thass advocating radical action against the upper castes in this write up are not clear. Thass’s frustrations with the British policies and the failure to empower the marginalized religious and caste groups, on the one hand, and the surging of the upper castes in the British administration by their participation in the Indian Civil Services, and through the Indian National Congress (by the mediating power and entrenchment of the upper castes), on the other, could have given rise to his sharp reaction. This moment in Thass also reveals that he was not merely for a passive Buddhism of the marginalized as a way out of caste oppression; rather, he was open to direct political actions against the caste system for both material and cultural change in India.

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<sup>117</sup> T November 9, 1910.

### **Polyphony of opposition**

Thass's writing and speaking against religious and caste oppression was not alone voice. On the contrary, he organized the structure of *The Tamilan* in such a way as to elicit thoughts from women and men that will not merely echo his position on Parayars, Buddhism, caste, Hinduism, women's conditions, Europeans, Americans, colonial administration, and missionaries, but also would take their independent positions. In fact, there were instances in which Thass and others disagreed, yet he published the debate in *The Tamilan* without censoring. In other words, Thass's *The Tamilan* brought together a collective voice on issues of religion, caste, class, and gender. Some instances to substantiate such claims are only in order.

Swapneswari Ambal who was a contemporary of Thass and the editor of the Tamil journal *Tamil Maadhu* was a close confidant of his. In fact, *Tamilan* had a special section with a title "Ladies Column", to which Swapneswari was a regular contributor and signed off as "a sister of all people, K. Swapneswari Ambal" (*sarvajana sakotiri ko swapneswari ambal*). Apart from introducing *The Tamilan* as a means to spread Buddhism and to shed the "light of wisdom" (*nanamennum oliyai adaiyunkal*), she does not hesitate to write critically about gender differences. Emphasizing the need for women's education, for instance, on a par with men's, she criticizes those male poets, singers, and writers who function without principle and are insensitive to the need of female education.<sup>118</sup> Likewise Swapneswari insists on female education in order to safeguard women from the law that favors men irrespective of their crimes, and she calls women who oppose education for obscure reasons as retrogrades and "totally-superstitious creatures (*mulumoodachikaamanikal*).<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> *T* August 14, 1907, 3-4

<sup>119</sup> *T* October 10, 1910.

In another article titled “Indian Women” Swapneswari talks about the necessity of women to become their own agents of change. For her this meant women not just boldly rejecting superstitions, gods and goddesses, and ignorance. Instead Swapnesari wants women to take care of themselves and pursue creative living that would make them happy and inspire young girls. Most importantly, she exhorts women not to indulge in “Hindu vulgarities” (*hindukalin aapasa kolkaigalai neeki*) associated with idol worship, pilgrimages, sun, moon, earthquake, rainbow, thunder and lightning. Instead she wants Indian women to learn science (such as astronomy and geography in order to learn about nature), which should be combined with personal experience of things (*suyaanubavatinaalum*) for one’s own clarity and to share with others.<sup>120</sup>

T C Narayanasami Pillai is another regular contributor to *The Tamilan*. He was also a member-functionary in Buddhist organizations and activities in Ooty and Coimbatore parts of the Tamil speaking areas. His writings not only dealt philosophically with themes such as the claims of moral purity claims of brahminism/Hinduism and the resulting socio-cultural persecution of communities, but also engaged in examining the conditions and emancipation of Parayars. For instance, under the title “original natives and the present Parayars” (*poorva swadesikalum tarkala parayarkalum*) Pillai, holds brahmins responsible for the Parayars’ conditions. That is, he says that brahmins called the original Buddhists Parayars derogatorily and pushed them into menial jobs such as grave digging, cremation, drumming Parai (the drum), removing human waste, and selling fodder (grass). Pillai says that while the Parayars languish the brahmins live by duping their fellow-human beings (reference to priesthood). Significantly, he also talks about the deleterious consequences of marginalization on Parayars, that in order to escape their

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<sup>120</sup> *T* August 7, 1912.

indignities the Parayars masquerade in the name of upper castes and become Christians to call themselves “Caste Christian,” and “East Indian” [Anglo-Indians]. Instead Pillai appeals to them to declare themselves as Buddhists and register in the Buddhist associations thriving in places such as Rayapetai in Chennai. This he says will give them fearless strength. Pillai concludes his piece provocatively, thus: “since the brahmins say that molten lead should be poured into the ears of Sudras (*sootirakkaararkal*) (lower castes) if the Sudras listen to the brahmin reciting Vedas, since we are Sudras why should we follow the Vedas and the filthy gods that are not meant for us. Only when we follow our own ancient Buddhism that we and our future generations can prosper. Otherwise, we are destined to suffer [under casteism].”<sup>121</sup>

G. Appadurai Pillai who signed off his writings in the *The Tamilan* sometimes as “admirer of Christianity G. Appadurai Pillai, mill-driver [mill worker], Champion Reefs (in Kolar Gold Fields in Karnataka of South India)” was another interlocutor and fellow Buddhist of Thass. In fact, Thass, as with T. C. Narayanasami Pillai, had rejected Appadurai Pillai’s articles for *The Tamilan* sometimes and published the reasons for doing so frankly saying that they were too provocative or were in needless debates with fellow participant contributors in *The Tamilan*. True to Thass’s admiration of Appadurai’s Tamil linguistic skills, he rose up as the reviver of *The Tamilan*, after Thass’s demise in 1914, as *Kolar Tamilan* in 1926.<sup>122</sup>

Writing under the title “Is there compassion among those who call themselves brahmins?” Appadurai poses himself as an interlocutor to one Venu who had written elsewhere that since the brahmins are vegetarians and bathe thrice a day before their meals they are more disciplined and compassionate than the Buddhists and Christians. Taking umbrage at such assertions, Appadurai asks Venu whether those Aryan brahmins who roasted beef and goat, and

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> G. Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity*, (Bangalore: New International, 2000).

the ones Venu refers to are one and the same; and if they are different, then who are those brahmins who consume meat in restaurants [called “hotels” in India]? Questioning whether someone who deprives others of the necessities and pleasures of life, someone who hides his food while eating, and someone who ruins ten families in order to safeguard his own, be a compassionate person, Appadurai further asks whether beyond their own groups any one has ever been a beneficiary of the brahmins’ compassion. On the contrary, he says those who have never treated their fellow-beings as equals could never be compassionate. In this context, Pillai points out the irony of touching cattle and dogs that eat excreta as a mark of compassion, while practicing untouchability against those who eat and live like brahmins do.

Furthermore, Appadurai censures Venu that if bathing thrice is discipline for the brahmin, then, the prostitute who bathes four times a day, the butchers who bathes thrice, the toddy and arrack makers who bathe thrice are no different from the brahmin. Whereas, from a brahmin’s point of view, those Buddhists and Christians who abjure prostitution, liquor, killing, lies, and hatred, without bathing thrice a day, are deemed undisciplined and unethical. Arguing that those brahmins who practice Sati and indulge in alcohol could never be compassionate, Appadurai concludes that it is ridiculous that brahmins call Buddhists and Christians untouchables.<sup>123</sup>

A P Periasami Pulavar is another stalwart of this pioneering movement against caste. He was also known for his erudition, Tamil linguistic skills, and anti-caste activism in Tirupatoor in northern Tamil Nadu and Champion Reefs of Kolar Gold Fields in Karnataka. As a regular contributor to *The Tamilan* his themes ranged from critical views on the Mahabaratam, to the wisdom of Buddhism, and the challenges of establishing the Buddhist institutions.

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<sup>123</sup> *T* January 18, 1911.



Pulavar's interpretation of Buddhism in the Tamil speaking areas in many ways reflected Thass's position; however, he left his own stamp on his own, manner of articulating the relations between those who were marginalized as Parayars and Buddhism, their incompatibilities with brahmins, and the latter's contradictions in their claims of religiosity. For instance, in Pulavar's two-part serial on the theme "The Lamp of Shining Wisdom" (*zhannaprakasachudar*) he talks about the self-destruction of those evil-mongers (*padu-paavikal*) who curse the Buddhists as Parayars, especially because of the latter's re-discovery of their past. Briefly mentioning that those who survived the cruelties of the Saivites and Vaishnavites (upper caste / Hindu denominations) against the Buddhists and those who lived before them in South India became Parayars, Pulavar rejects swadesism as the revival of caste power, and cautions that if the marginalized embrace it whatever little grounds they have gained against the caste discrimination will disappear.

Pointing out the farce of those who call themselves as *aastikan* i.e., theist, indulging in caste-barbarity (*panchamapaatankalai*), Pulavar appeals to those who suffer upper caste oppression to master the five-Tamil-classics (*manimekalai*, *valayapati*, *kundalakesai*, *silapatikaram*, and *sivaka sintamani*) to know the "truth" (*unmai vilankum*) i.e., about the past of Buddhism and the brahminical dominance. Interestingly, Pulavar appeals to the readers of *The Tamilan* to inspire "the Tamils" in this Buddhist corpus ("*tamilanai*" *urchakapadutunkal*), instead of referring to them by caste names, including Parayars. Pulavar openly identifies with such Tamil personhood, and with the anti-caste legacy of those peripheralized as Parayars through his reference to Tamil literature *nanavetiyan* and *sivavakiyam*, which reject caste-discrimination as a meaningless fabrication. Detailing the gruesomeness of caste by

personalizing and writing “this is how our forebears have suffered” (*ipadiyellam nummunorkal paadupatirukkindrana*), Pulavar concludes with an appeal to

come forward to investigate the oppression of how the pseudo-brahmins reduced us who followed caste-free dharmum (Buddhist righteousness) as Parayar, Panchamar, Neetchar, Pulayar, Sambar, and Right-hand castes. For doing this some might mock us saying that though we aspire to become an upper caste, a Parayan will remain a Parayan. Oh Buddhists, we are doing this only to progress in the future by knowing our own past (*numpoorvanilayai kandu munnadaivatarkeyandri veralla*), and not to have any relations with those who are with tails (*vaalotikaludan*) [upper castes with caste indicating second name/surname].<sup>124</sup>

Being a person open to debate about Indian society, Thass not only publishes the comments that appreciate and expand contributors’ ideas, but also the criticisms of them. For instance, impressed with Pulavar’s investigation of Hindu religious stories such as Mahabaratam, a reader suggests that he must also write about Ramayanam, and Vedantam. On the other hand, readers comment about the futility of one writing about brahminical fictions, such as Mahabaratam, that only waste the pages and one’s time, and do not have anything worthwhile for humanity.

Many letter writers to *The Tamilan* turn the ideas generated by Thass and others to radical effect in indentifying themselves as Buddhists in thought and action. For instance, one C. P. Subramanya Sakravarty, who signs off as “a descendant of Buddha” (*Buddha sakravarty veeravagu parampara*) indicts Hinduism as a legacy of Aryan barbarity that has not only eliminated the Buddhists but also reduced those who survived as untouchables. He points out

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<sup>124</sup> *T* May 6 and May 20, 1908. The problematic of hierarchization of caste power in the right and left hand caste divisions has not been adequately examined, particularly its dehumanizing effect on the marginalized such as Parayars, Arunthatityars (derogatorily referred to as Sakkiliyars), Devendra Kula Vellalars (derogatorily referred to as Pallars) and others. Instead, a functionalist structural value, similar to the *jajmani system*, which romanticizes upper and lower caste relations as merely typifying “give and take” principle is generally attributed to it. See Brenda Beck, *Peasant Society in Konk: A Study of Right and Left Hand Castes in South India*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1972); Arjun Appadurai, “Right and Left Hand Castes in South India,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 11 (1974): 216-259.

that those who were brutalized as untouchables were forced into hard labor and menial jobs such as scavenging (removing human excreta), burying the dead, and as consumers of dead cattle and dirty water—anticipating Ambedkar. Furthermore, Sakravarty exposes the ironies and cruelties of untouchability in Hindu Shastras, which say that those who dig the ponds will pollute the water if they drink, but not the dirty animals such as dogs, pigs, donkeys and buffaloes, and the dirty clothes that the Hindus wash. The upper caste practice of denial and exclusion also come under Sakravarty's scrutiny when he writes about what the former call "exceptional birth," to deny the creativity of those marginalized as untouchables by branding the talented among them as "exceptions," and explaining the reason for the exception of one was born to an upper caste male and a lower caste woman. He cites Tiruvalluvar (the author of the Tamil classic Tirukural), as an instance of such a denial, since the upper castes talk about his birth as resulting from a brahmin father and Parayar mother. Furthermore, he says that though there are many Tamil literary figures from among those who have suffered caste exclusion; however, the upper castes paradoxically ask whether such authors are Tamils or untouchables.<sup>125</sup> If the victims say that they too are 'Hindus' and they have the rights like any body else to Hindu gods and temples, would the upper castes let them be alive, he asks. For these reasons, Sakravarty doubts that those

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<sup>125</sup> One must note here that the non-brahmin upper castes such as Vellalans who were attacking the brahmins for caste discrimination and viewed themselves as Tamils had ironically entertained pejorative notions of caste against the marginalized such as the Parayars. One can therefore see two notions of Tamilhood contemporaneously: an inclusive anti-caste Tamil identity embraced by the marginalized that was invoking Buddhism by rejecting Saivism and Vaishnavism as later caste formations after Tamil Buddhism, and an exclusionary Vellala Saivism that stood against the Buddhism of the marginalized and Vaishnavism of the brahmins. For Vedachalam's rejection of Buddhism and upholding of vegetarian Vellalan Saivism as "the" religion of the Tamils see Vedachalam, *Velalar Nagarikam*.

who are excluded with such violence as Parayars, could be Hindus. He views, thus, their legacy as Buddhists.<sup>126</sup>

Ma. Masilamani Mudaliyar from No. 99 Varada Munniappan Street, George Town, Chennai writes a letter under the title “Temples are free-food centers for the Aryans,” which captures the impression of contributors to *The TAMILIAN* and their readership and audience. He says Siva and Vishnu temples are claimed to show the way to the kingdom of heaven, whereas they are free food centers that help brahmins thrive in this world. This is seen in the way that the Sudras are dispensed with sacred ash, red powder, tulsi, and tulsi water as prasadam.<sup>127</sup>

“Whereas the brahmins reserve for themselves varieties of rice such as tamarind rice, sweet rice, pepper rice, vadai, dosai, tatiyodannam, and sitiraannam,” Mudaliyar says. Furthermore, he says that although the Aryans build their temples with the money of the Sudras, their only benefit is to fatten brahmin bodies (*piramanattirumenikalukku*) while leaving the Sudras emaciated.

Therefore, he argues that temples are not for practicing and learning the right conduct (*uttamavalipaattai*) in society. Rather they are for brahminical trickery. In order to substantiate what he says, Mudaliyar narrates the way brahmins trick Sudras into benefaction. He says a brahmin would go to a rich Sudra and fabricate a story saying that their god has been hungry for the past two days and wonder how a wealthy Sudra rich could eat his food without propitiating the gods. At once the Sudra will feel chagrined and agree to bear whatever it costs to propitiate the gods. Then the brahmin would ask for enough money to feed fifty or sixty people with which they would fill the bellies of their fellow-brahmins with a sumptuous meal. Whereas the other castes (*matra saatiyar*) will only get sacred ash for their devotion.

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<sup>126</sup> *T* April 8, 1914.

<sup>127</sup> It refers to sacred materials [food and other items] distributed by the priest/brahmin after he performs the rituals to a goddess or god. Usually the prasadam is the bits taken from what the devotees give to the priests, the rest of which are consumed by the priests and their families.

Mudaliyar also has another section titled “The Orthodox” (*itesatavarin aacharataipatri*) under which he writes three bullet points about the contradictions of those who call themselves clean castes (brahmins mostly). The first point he makes with sarcasm as he discusses the orthodoxy (*aacharam*) of the Aryan religion. According to this religion, its adherents (*aryamada podanai*) do not hesitate to use the leaves of trees on which the birds and animals urinate and defecate, weave them with the twigs of a broom that is used to sweep filth, and use these as plates for their food. However, due to their Aryan religious arrogance (*aryamada podanaiyin tadippeyakum*) they say that the utensils made from various metals in England and other countries are polluting. Mudaliyar’s second point demystifies the orthodoxy of the Kshatriyar. He says that the fisher-folk use their teeth to break the thorns of the fish that are stuck in the net. Once the fishes are unhinged from the net by the teeth of the fisher-folk, they put them in a pot that has water so that they are alive when they sell, and are bought by “the orthodox Kshatriyar” (*aacharamulla shatriyar*), who are fish eaters. What Mudaliyar says is that those who claim themselves to belong to orthodox castes only eat that which is bitten into by the fisher-folks, who are supposedly lower castes. The third point of Mudaliyar is that the orthodox consume goat meat bought from the Muslim butchers. After all these points, Mudaliyar asks, “is this orthodoxy?” and concludes with sarcasm that probably the Aryan religion preaches that one should not see pollution in meat, fish, toddy, and arrack.<sup>128</sup>

In Masilamani Mudaliyar one is able to see the stringent investigation of the brahminical profiteering through the temple culture, which to this day remains inadequately examined. True to his disavowal of orthodoxy and, despite having a non-brahmin upper caste surname i.e., Mudaliyar, he exposes the contradiction in the purity claims of various caste groups. He is yet

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<sup>128</sup> T August 31, 1910.

another example of *The Tamilan* reader who is incisive in extending the anti-caste criticism. Here we need to note that many of *The Tamilian* readers including Mudaliyar, like Thass, could have been *siddha* medical practitioners who had openly “poked fun at the fastidious, Pharisaical Brahmin, who found spittle repellent but ate honey, the saliva of bees, and drank milk extruded from a cow’s teat mixed with calf’s froth.”<sup>129</sup>

It is clear that the women and men who were participating *The Tamilan* were deeply committed to anti-caste criticism of the Indian society. It is also evident that they saw the problems of caste and gender as interconnected. In fact, some of the co-writers of Thass were sharply exposing the contradictions in Hindu spiritual and scriptural claims of humanism, including by pointing to the existential aspects of discriminatory social relations. They also upheld the view that they did not belong to the “nation” and “nationalism” in India that was brahminical, therefore, exclusionary. However, the participants were influenced by a racial theory of understanding caste. That is, Aryan brahmin invaders as the causal factor of the caste system, while seeing themselves as indigenous Buddhists, Dravidians, Dravidian Buddhists, and Tamil Buddhists.

## Conclusion

This chapter points to, in multiple ways, the existence of anti-caste subjectivity among those marginalized-by-caste, particularly the Parayars. Foremost among these is their criticism of cultural categories, practices, and symbolisms that are purportedly universal horizontally, but actually privileges and subjugates vertically. Each of these demonstrates how Hindu upper caste notions of humanity, touchable-untouchable, Parayars, and *jati* as well as colonial legitimization,

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<sup>129</sup> See R. F. Young and S. Jebanesan, *The Bible Trembled*, 71

have the effect of dichotomizing relations among the Hindus as upper castes versus lower castes, brahmin versus non-brahmin, Parayar versus non-Parayars, in ways that are weighed heavily against the one who is lower. The direct manifestation of this kind of discursive investigation were the number of women and men who engaged in willed-action, in terms of speaking, writing, publishing, petitioning, and rejecting what was presumed as given, i.e., their meek acceptance of what was bestowed on them by colonial and caste power.

Needless to say, that this also had rhetorical and ambiguous engagements in categories and theses such as Dravidian and Aryan, and pseudo-brahmin and real-brahmin. However, it is precisely through exploring these categories that the voice of the subaltern could interrogate the oppression of the double-edged sword of caste and colonialism—the caste side of the sword was experienced and seen as sharper, especially in the late colonialism when the transfer of power to the upper castes was imminent. More importantly, the questioning by the marginalized of actual and symbolic was an impetus to more action, to better articulate their personhood and place inseparably in their own cultural, religious, and identity terms.<sup>130</sup> The next chapter will grapple with some of these aspects.

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<sup>130</sup> For more details on place determining the agency of communities see Carla Bellamy, “Person in Place: Possession and Power at an Indian Islamic Saint Shrine,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 241: 1, (2008), 31-43

## **Chapter Two**

### **Reconstruction of the Self: Tamil Buddhists' Self-discovery and Authority\***

The individuals and communities that were marginalized in India did not stop with the criticism of the caste system and its beneficiaries such as the upper castes. They simultaneously produced counter-narratives of their own cultural and religious history. These were not only diametrically opposed to the brahminical equation of Indian society as Hindu, as caste-based, but also reconstructed their legacy as Buddhists in Indian history predating caste formations. In this chapter, I examine the ways in which those who considered themselves caste-free,<sup>131</sup> such as the Parayars, refashioned their sense of India as a Buddhist nation, their antiquity as Indian and Tamil Buddhists, in contrast to the upper caste Hindu view of India, on the one hand, and that of the colonial indologists and the government, on the other. Furthermore, I discuss the emergence of heteroglossia of Tamil Buddhists through *The Tamilan* and the spread of Tamil Buddhist organizations far and wide.

#### **Nation as beyond caste and religion**

Thass considers caste and religious division as the curse of Indian society. He found the flaunting of caste by the educated even more odious. He holds, therefore, that even though the

\* This sub title is borrowed from Valerie Smith, *African American Writers: Self-discovery and Authority*, (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1984).

<sup>131</sup> The term caste-free is specifically used to resonate the Parayars' sense of their identity as beyond caste and as a translation of what Thass writes about the marginalized communities as *saatipetamatra samookam*.



privileged castes have BA and MA degrees their narrow mindedness in social relations is expressed in their attitude of: “‘our’ castes should only form an association of our own, and ‘your’ castes, only your own; ‘our’ religious groups will construct temples for ‘our’ own gods, and ‘your’ religious groups should have your own temples for ‘your’ own gods.” It is this kind of thinking, Thass contends, that has sown the seeds of disunity and hatred for each other, and the “disintegration of the nation” (*tesaotrumaiketirkum*), and the “destruction of the the nation (*tesaseertirutatirkum*).” All that the upper castes want, he points out, is that the (colonial) power to govern should be given to them and only the educated among them deserve the big jobs of administration. This they do, Thass says, through harangues about the “prestige” of their castes from their house stoops and by extolling their religions in the streets. These practices for him have only led to the accumulation of wealth among the few castes that do not treat people as people and their wealth is never spent on the “nation’s poor” (*itesattuelaimakkalin*) for their education and employment. Even when the British created opportunities for employment for all, he adds, the upper castes, in order to monopolize the benefits, label others as belonging to this or that lower caste in order to deprive them of their due.<sup>132</sup>

For all these reasons Thass minces no words about those who made religion and caste into social capital by discriminating against others. For instance, he says,

since the pseudo-constructions of caste and religion are responsible for the ruination of Indian society, those who pretend themselves to be reformers (*seertirutakkaranena*) and rave about reforming the Depressed Classes should actually give up their conceit about their caste, religion, education, and wealth. Instead they should work for brotherhood and integration among all, which alone is the foundation for all reforms.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> *T* May 31, 1911.

<sup>133</sup> Depressed Classes is a category floated by the British for the untouchables first and even embraced by some such communities. Thass is against this category. See the next chapter for more details. *T* May 31, 1911.

Here he reveals the exclusionary attitudes of the upper castes that accrue from their complex appropriation of wealth and education on the foundation of caste and religion, and vice versa, even as they obscure the role of the marginalized and their labor in the accumulation of upper caste wealth.<sup>134</sup>

In fact, Thass narrows down the reasons for the disintegrated “the nation” of India to two sets.<sup>135</sup> The first is the way caste and religion have fractured the everyday life of Indians. This he explains in a fictional dialogue between a *swadesi* (native) and *paradesi* (the migrant) series that he writes in *The Tamilan* for thirteen weeks. In one edition Thass narrativises his thoughts on caste and religion succinctly. The *swadesi*, the native, poses a question to the *Paradesi*, the migrant: “how will the nation be ruined by caste and religious discrimination?” At once the migrant answers,

since actions of caste and religious discrimination are lies and fabrications, the learned always resent it. Because humans categorizing each other as lower (*kilsaati*) and upper castes (*melsaati*) is a hostile (*vivotam*) act, not exchanging bride and groom, and not having food at each other’s house are hostile acts, cursing each other because of caste-hatred is hostile, the caste divisions combined with religious hatred is solemnized through the Vedas is hostile, since fabricating exclusionary gods and justifying what suits Siva does not suit Vishnu, vice-versa, is deplorable, the sake of making money upholding one’s own *Jagadguru* [religious head] for the sake of money and not recognizing others’ as well as insisting that ones own ’ gods alone should have a *hundial* [money collecting pot] and not others’ gods is hostile, , and people have lost their knowledge, wisdom, generosity, and right-path (*vitai, puti, egai, and sanmarkam*) because caste and religious discrimination has led to this hostility. People choose to indulge in laziness, hatred, and

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<sup>134</sup> This is similar to the current ways of identifying the marginalized as “weaker sections,” “Scheduled Castes,” “Harijans,” and so on that rationalize their marginality and legitimize the power of the privileged groups’ naming them so through government policies and in civil society.

<sup>135</sup> Thass’s notion of nation is one that is based on uncompromising equality among women and men and it is unrestrained by hierarchizing division of religion, caste, race, and wealth. On the other hand, it is also embedded in linguistic commonality and territorial contiguity. For a critical understanding of nationalism and the Indian national movement See Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

jealousies in order to become pseudo-brahmins and ruin many families so that they may take care of their own. In believing in such pseudo-gurus people become their prey, like the goats that follow the butcher believing that only their caste will give them riches and only their gods will give them food (*sorupodum*). Thus, the people consign their nation to infamy.<sup>136</sup>

This irony of characters in this dialogue serves Thass as a ploy to demystify the nationalism of *the Swadesis and Swarajists* against the British, showing them instead as being a movement for upper castes' prosperity against those they oppress in the name of religion and caste. In contrast to and as a rejection of the privileged castes, he upholds the indigeneity of the marginalized as a pre-caste formation, and their aspirations as a commitment to the re-establishment for a caste-free nation.

In Thass's views the other set of reasons for the demise of the nation in India is pushing the caste-free Buddhists into caste subjugation (*talti seerkulaituvitu*). For Thass, therefore, the emergence of caste and religious divisions in Indian society happened only as an aftermath of the demise of Buddhism. Because he views the end of Buddhism through brahminism as the end of non-hierarchical kinship among Indians, Thass repudiates the claims of Hinduism and *swadesism*, and the nationalism associated with them as only empty upper caste rhetoric meant to misdirect people in general, and in particular to keep those they categorized as lower castes in a starnglehold.

Thass's investigation of upper caste material benefits through the social capital of caste-based-religiosity (Hinduism) could have convinced the readers of *The Tamilian* more easily, since the Indian National Congress then functioned as a body of and for upper caste members mostly, as we saw in the first chapter. However, Thass's second set of explanations for the disintegration of India, as a concomitant development of the elimination of "caste-free

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<sup>136</sup> *T* July 26, 1911.

Buddhists,” could have called for more evidentiary justifications. Conversely, therefore, Thass engages in multiple narratives on Buddhism in Indian history as in order to substantiate his counter claims about their preceding caste and religious divisions. Some instances in this regard are in order.

***Indira Tesa Saritiram: Buddha as Indirar, Buddhists as Indiyar***

Even though each part of History of the Indian Nation (*Indira Tesa Saritiram*), which Iyothee Thass wrote in sixty-five parts between August 1910 and November 1911, has a unique tale to tell, one can sense a thematic structure in the way he serialized it. Foremost among them is Thass’ narrative of India as originally a Buddhist nation. In fact, the very first part of *saritiram* functions as a template of Buddhist historical materialism, so to speak, which prefigures his examination, in later parts in this series, of the emergence of the *milechar* (Aryans) and their Saivism and Vaishnavism, the destruction of Buddhist kings such as Nandan and Iranyan, the radical-opposition of the lay-Buddhists against the pseudo-brahmins, and the ascension of Manu Dharma Smiriti and its dehumanization of Indian society to the present.

In the opening sentence of the first part, Thass says that the word *indiram*, referring to India, is a derivative of the words *ayimpori* and *ayintiram*. Thass interprets these Tamil words to signify Buddha and his success in controlling the five (*ayim / ayin*) senses (*pori / tiram*) for ethical actions. These then became the principles for establishing Indian society and those who followed these ethics and formed associations with Buddha came to be known as *indiyar*, Indians. Their celebrations, honoring Buddha, were called *indiravizhakkal*, Buddhist festivals, their meeting places were known as *indiraviyarankal*, Buddhist Viharas. This opening uncannily

ushers the readers to Thass's reading against prevalent religious notions and traditions, i.e., mythical and mystifying Hindu denominations such as Saivism and Vaishnavism.<sup>137</sup>

Along the same lines, Thass writes that India was *baratam* (Bharat) because Buddha was known as *varatar*, *baratar* and also since he was known for his practice of *aram*, meaning ethical action or conduct. Since this country, *baratam*, celebrated Buddha for his influence of ethical practices its northern part came to be known as *vadabaratam*, north-India, and its southern part *tenbaratam*, south-India. Through these etymological connections Thass rivets the reader to read India's past as originally Buddhist. As if to preempt the question of validity of his claims, he uses Tamil texts—that are not attributed to the “British Discovery”<sup>138</sup>—such as *Tolkapiyam*, *Manimekalai*, *Veeracoliyam*, *Silapatikaram*, *Valaiyapati*, *Kundalakesi*, *Sivak Sintaamani* and other Tamil grammatical and lexical texts that belong to the fourth century AD onwards to substantiate his narrative.

More importantly, for Thass Buddhism could spread in India only because of its advocacy of ethics in material and spiritual aspects of human relations. This, for him, was manifested in the way the Buddhists invented languages on the one hand, and structured the horizontal division of labor among themselves on the other. Elaborating these two Buddhist developments Thass writes that Pali, Sanskrit, and Tamil came into being in order to spread Buddhist ethics (*aram*) in Magadh country (*magadha nadu*), Sagata country (*sagata nadu*), and

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<sup>137</sup> T August 31, 1910.

<sup>138</sup> For a critical examination of the role of colonialism and canonizing Hinduism and Buddhism respectively see P. J. Marshall, *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) and Philip. C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). For a path breaking study that unveiled the connection between the brahmins' acquiring power over other Indians through Sanskrit and colonialism sanctifying brahmins through Sanskrit, see Bernard Cohn, “The command of language and language of command,” in *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 16-56.

Dravidian country (*tiravida nadu*) respectively. The formations of these languages signal the shift from oral to written tradition in order to spread Buddhist values far and wide.<sup>139</sup>

Dwelling more upon the Tamil speaking areas Thass says that the division of labor among the Buddhists was broadly four-fold: those who worked the land “using their hands and legs like machines” were *sootirakararkal* in north India and *vellalarkal* in South India; those who did business were known as *vaisyarkal* in north India and *settiyarkal* in south India; those who protected the draught animals and people were *kshatriyarkal* in north India and *arasar* in south India, and those who understood life and death and time, i.e., the learned, came to be known as *piramanarkal* (Sanskrit), *arahants* (Pali), and *antanarkal* (Tamil).<sup>140</sup> Thass thus introduces new twists to familiar categories, by clearly rejecting hierarchy and endogamy.<sup>141</sup> Beyond the general four-fold division of Indian society, Thass also talks about a more fluid category called *tenpulathor* i.e., those who acquire knowledge through deeper understanding of human body and humanity.

Regarding the spread of these Buddhist ideas Thass writes that Buddha-Viyarankal (Buddha-Viharas), also known as moral education schools (*arap-pallikal*) had spread out in

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<sup>139</sup> For a detailed understanding of the role of Orientalism, colonialism, and indigenous scholarship in the making of modern Tamil see Thomas R. Trautmann, *Languages and Nations: The Dravidian Proof in Colonial Madras*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>140</sup> R. S. Vedachalam appears to reproduce such categorization in his *Tamilar Matam* without mentioning his source. In fact, given his rejection of Thass’s Buddhist reading of Tamils’ history, Vedachalam’s *Tamilar Matam* is, arguably, structured and produced to counter it with vegetarian Saivism of the Vellalan. The practice of which makes the latter a member of an upper caste by reinscribing Parayars as lower most of all “Tamil castes”—thus reproducing the dichotomies in the brahminical sense that Vedachalam criticizes, as said before. See Vedachalam, *Tamilar Matam*.

<sup>141</sup> This was in total contrast to the Tamil purist movement of Vedachalam and others, which retained pejorative notions of caste even as they campaigned about “Tamil religion,” “Tamil culture,” and so on. See Vedachalam *Velalar Nakarikam* and *Tamilar Matam*.

Maduraipuram, Tiruchipuram, Kanchipuram, Mavalipuram, and Chidambaram in the Tamil speaking region (today they have, however, become major saivite and vaishnavite temple towns). The learned (*antanarkal*) in South India preferred Tamil, instead of Sanskrit, as the medium to impart the following knowledge to children from the age of five to sixteen and the adults: a) grammar, literary, math, and medicine books (“*Ilakkana, Ilakkiya, kanita, vaitiya nool*”) b) social values of conciliation, sharing, differentiation, and support (*saama, daana, paeta, dandam*) c) the Buddhist principles of *phronesis*, wisdom, generosity, and right-conduct (*vittai, putti, egai, and sanmarkam*). Thass unpacks such views through Tamil literary texts such as *arunkaliceppu, peruntirattu* and others to substantiate his perception of robust presence of Buddhism among Indians.

The above narrative of Buddhist life in India embedded in inter-regional exchanges, inter-linguistic marriages, humanistic learning, and non-hierarchical material practices and divisions of labor in the preceding parts of *The Tamilan* was not without end. It was brought to a close in the October 12, 1910 issue of *The Tamilan*, as he inaugurated his investigation of the causes for the end of Buddhism in India through the arrival of *milecharkal*.

Who are these *milecharkal*? Using the Tamil texts of Asva Gosa’s *purana sangai telivu* and Tolamolittevar’s *soolamani* Thass says that the *milechar* are outsiders, also referred as *milechasaatiyor*, those of the out side, who migrated from their native land *Purusikam*, but they lived in *Kumanida Tesam* on the other bank of the Sind river (*Sindural Nadi*). Since it still might not be clear to the readers who the *milechar* are, Thass refers to Senthandrivakaratevar’s *munkalainool* and Madalapurudan’s *pinkalainool* to identify them as *Aryarkal* (Aryans) interchangeably with *milechar*. In other words, although he was aware of racial categories such as Dravidian, Aryan, Mongoloid, etc., that were in circulation among the Orientalists and

colonial anthropologists and administrators, Thass's understanding of Aryans is anchored more in Tamil literary sources. It is also important to note here that his description of the Aryans is used in order to indict caste practices among the brahmins, whose exclusionary living weighed heavily on communities such as the Parayars, rather than to foist a watertight view of racial types of Indians and foreigners.<sup>142</sup>

The arrival of the *milechar* / Aryans for Thass is the onset of the destruction of collective life in India, particularly for the Buddhists who had inhabited this land for long. Timing the *arya milechar* migration into India as thousand seven hundred years after Buddha's *parinirvana* (1200AD?), he says that they were known for their distinguishable characteristics such as being fair in color. Their women wore trousers, i.e., *kurta (kalsattai)* and they were kept away from home for seven days when they were menstruating. More importantly, Thass says, they were known for their trickery in learning Tamil and Sanskrit to pretend that they too were the learned i.e., *piraminarkal/arahants/antanar*, but only to indulge in what he calls authoritative begging (*adikarappitchai*) i.e., priestcraft.

For all these qualities of *milechar/aryarkal* Thass categorizes them not as brahmins/*piraminarkal* but as pseudo-brahmins/*veshapiramanarkal*. Semantically analyzing the term *piraminarkal* as a Sanskrit term for those who have ethical qualities, he says, the Aryans only pretended to possess such values while they actually fooled the gullible and uneducated. Thass mobilizes references and rhetoric to make the point that the caste-brahmins, instead of

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<sup>142</sup> Thass's understanding of race and linguistic communities in South Asia could have been reinforced, if not influenced by, the Orientalist scholars such as Caldwell. Certainly, Caldwell's philological investigation of Tamil and substantiation of Tiru Valluvar, the author of *tirukural*, as a Parayar could have won him over to Thass and other Tamil Buddhists. However, Thass distinguishes himself by his own Buddhist explanations regarding the origin of languages in India, unlike Caldwell, as said before in the chapter one. See Robert Caldwell, *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian Family of Languages*, eds., J. L. Wyatt and T. Ramakrishna Pillai, (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Truber and Co, 1913), 48.



having anything original of their own they masqueraded under Buddhist categories only to exploit fellow-beings.

Once those who claim themselves to be brahmins are portrayed as pseudo-brahmins, faking Buddhist theory and practice, then everything associated with them is seen as an imitation. After the brahmin claims are scrutinized as overlays on Buddhism, Thass posits that as a corollary the brahmins are opposed and rejected culturally. Thass deconstructs brahminical practices, such as, sacred thread ceremony (*upanayanam*), sacred ash (*vibuti*), fasting (*viratam*), sacrificial fire (*yakam*), temple (*kovil*), idols (*silai*), and internal-light (*brahmum / ulloli*), as originally Buddhist practices with humanistic aspects to them. However, the caste-brahmins/pseudo-brahmins/*veshapiraminarkal*, in Thass's reading have only used them to disintegrate (*otrumaikedu*) and divide (*pirivinai*) humanity.<sup>143</sup>

In fact, Thass negates saivite claims of indigenesness in India when he examines Saivism as a denomination of the invaders/*milecherkal*. Contrary to the saivite mythologies prevalent among its believers, Thass writes that Siva, Neelakandan, Sanga-arar, Sanga-mittirar, and Sanga-darumar are names not of the god Siva, but of Buddha.<sup>144</sup>

Attributing the invention of saivite religion (*sivamatam*) to one Sivachari about whom we do not get to know more except for its saivite-brahmin sounding name, Thass says that the temple for Siva (*sivalayam*) is nothing but a twisting of the place where the statues in honor of the great Buddhists are kept (*sillalayam*). While he acknowledges people honoring Buddhists by making statues, Thass rejects idolatry in rituals. He deconstructs, therefore, *linga* worship (*sivalingam*) as an obsession with sexuality and legitimization of infidelity through gods who

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<sup>143</sup> T December 7, 1910.

<sup>144</sup> For the glorification of Saivism as "Tamils' only religion," See Vedachalam *Tamilar Matam*.

have two or more wives, by displacing Buddhist fidelity between woman and man.<sup>145</sup> Arguing that idolatry—the belief that stone would heal, protect, produce children, and give wisdom—is irrational, Thass views temple creation as a displacement of this-worldly Buddhist understanding of the human body, human suffering and humanity, by resolving it into other-worldly mystification. For Thass, this displacement is done actually for this-worldly exploitation of the gullible through esoteric religious discourses.<sup>146</sup>

Thass's presents an original examination of the brahminical practices that are not taken up at the popular widely. While his criticism of the myths behind *linga* worship and its implication on gender relations among the saivites is exemplary, Thass not stating on what basis he arrived at these influential conclusions about Hindu religious myths could have perplexed *The Tamilan* readers. That said, it is noteworthy that Thass opens the need to understand the etymological shifts in language, how that which are mundane could be rarefied and used for religious and caste purposes.

Furthermore, examining Saivism, Thass finds Sankarachari, the religious head of the saivites, as an agent of the coming together of arya and dravida caste-brahmins. Boldly caricaturing Sankarachari as somebody who is big-bodied, wearing silk-bordered-dress, gold and pearl jewelry and a long hat, and perched in a peculiar palanquin, which is carried and surrounded by only their own castemen (*saatiyor*), followed by elephants and camels for carrying and exploiting food from the gullible, Thass demystifies Sankarachari's claims of being a re-incarnation of Siva. Interestingly, his criticism of Vaishnavism is seamless with Saivism,

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<sup>145</sup> *T* September 13, 1911 This is also in total contrast to Vedachalam's view of Sivalingam as a signifier of fire and lamp: an interpretation that is diagonally opposite to the wide belief that it is phallus and vagina symbolizing man-woman love and reproduction.

<sup>146</sup> *T* June 28, 1911.

even as he examines the Bhagvat Gita, and Iranniyan and Pirabavakatan (Brahalatan) themes, in order to portray the oppressive nature of the invasive pseudo-brahmins irrespective of the religious denomination they belong to.<sup>147</sup>

The “invasion” of the *milechar*, however, did not go without the resistance of the Buddhists, laypeople, and kings alike. Thass explains that Buddhists guarding the gullible from exploitation was the major reason for the enmity between them and the Aryans.<sup>148</sup> A variety of reasons are posited in his examination of this enmity: 1) being a Buddhist refers to evolving into a better person by going through the seven stages of life (that is, evolving from plants, to worms, to fish, to birds, to animals, to men, to men of wisdom / emancipated beings),<sup>149</sup> whereas the pseudo-brahmins are known for their cruelties to fellow-beings, 2) Contrary to Buddhist ethics, pseudo-brahmins are immoral characters living through trickery, 3) Humane values are the mark of Buddha Viharas, whereas pseudo-brahmins practice exploitation through temples and idolatry. These are, Thass insists, some of the fundamental differences that keep Buddhists and the *milechar* apart.<sup>150</sup>

Thass contends that since the pseudo-brahmins enticed kings and laypeople—by their esoteric and fictitious claims of religious and lay power, as Thass says in many of his writings—to annihilate Buddhists in order to establish the caste system and fix the endogamic professions

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<sup>147</sup> T July 12, 1911.

<sup>148</sup> T April 12, 1911.

<sup>149</sup> T August 5, 1908. However, Thass is open to Darwin’s theory of evolution, which he thinks is a rational understanding of earth and its inhabitants. On the other hand, unlike Darwin, Thass combines natural evolution and spiritual transformation of humans in to *scala naturae*, that is, humans perfecting through a linear progression from small organism to complex spiritual being.

<sup>150</sup> T April 5, 1911.

with it, those Buddhists who opposed such practices were dubbed as *parayarkal* and *paraayarkal*.

Who *parayarkal* and *paraayarkal* and why are they called so? Thass's delineation of the terms of *parayarkal* and *paraayarkal* yields two meanings. One emphasizes that the term *parai* refers to the verb to speak. Thus, since the Buddhists "spoke against" the caste-brahmins' chicanery,<sup>151</sup> they became *parayarkal*. The term *parayarkal* thus stands for those who spoke against and Thass writes this in Tamil as "*poiveshankali paraikiravarkal*" i.e., those who speak against masqueraders. Secondly, the term *paraayarkal* is complexly used by Thass to also mean those who do not subscribe to a particular point of view, in this case referring to the religious positions of pseudo-brahmins. Therefore those who do not align with pseudo-brahmins were *paraayarkal*. In Tamil, Thass writes this as those who do not subscribe to pseudo-sermons (*poipotanaikalukku seraap paraayarkal*). Contrary to these two meanings in Tamil of the terms *parayarkal* and *paraayarkal*, and in opposition to those who deceive, Thass says the pseudo-brahmins concocted a new caste-based derogatory meaning to the term *parayar* i.e., untouchable, in order to tarnish the image of those who "spoke-against" and those who did not want to "subscribe to falsehood." Thus the Buddhists, Thass says, were categorized as untouchables, Pariah, and as those-who-bury-the-dead (*parayars* and *vetiyarkal*). And that is how it has remained to this day.

Thass's narrative strategy is to unsettle the *paraiyah-brahmin* dichotomy, which the brahmins and Orientalists had come to articulate. Instead of wishing this dichotomy away, Thass attempts to nullify the derogatory meaning by unpacking and infusing a non-exclusionary and

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<sup>151</sup> This is clear from the phrases that Thass uses often *poivesankalai paraikiravarkal* and *poipotanaikalukku seraap paraayarkal*.

caste-free meaning into the term Parayar. Significantly, this had the potential and set the tone for re-thinking the identity and history of the marginalized castes in non-caste terms.

Apart from conceptually trying to decastize the term Parayar, Thass writes about Parayars' view of a brahmin as a bad omen, thus reversing the caste gaze of the brahmin. For instance, he writes that despite the brahminical claims of superiority, the Buddhists would chase away brahmins whenever the latter intruded into their localities. He mentions that after chasing away the brahmins the Buddhists would pour cow-dung-water to clean up the place.<sup>152</sup> Nevertheless, Thass says that when the *milecharkal* ran away from the Buddhists they never admitted to their impersonations and exploitation. Instead they pointed to the untouchability of the Buddhists as the reason for their running away.

Thass' systematic explanations of how the Buddhists fell under brahmins' vanquishing of Buddhism in India reaches its climax with his examination of the structural establishment of the caste-order in India. For Thass this happens significantly through brahmins' authoring of the Manu Dharma Shastra. True to his methodology of deconstruction, Thass analyses, for over seven weeks in *The Tamilan*, the Manu Dharma Shastra as a text of immorality (*atanmanool*) and a blueprint for cruelty (this analysis is not taken up here for the sake of brevity).

The hermeneutics embedded in Iyothee Thass's *Indira Tesa Saritiram* seek to achieve multiple possibilities. That is, not just a critical rejection of brahminism, Thass also attempts to write "the history" of the marginalized of the caste system. He views the history of the Parayars, for instance, as antithetical to but independent of the brahmins or any caste group that would privilege itself by marginalizing Parayars as its/their Other. The immediate ground for this was that Thass could see the brahmin ascendance on the colonial ladder through marginalizing others,

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<sup>152</sup> Eyewitnesses say that his tradition was prevalent in some parts of Tamil speaking areas until 1940's.

particularly by dehumanizing and marginalizing communities as untouchables, as the Other of both caste and colonial power. In trying to understand this modern brahminism and its deleterious consequences to Indian society at large, he unravels the grand design behind the caste system through the ages that is in fact, in his view, an overlay on and distortion of pre-caste social formations in India. Thus, Thass not only rejects categories such as Parayar, Depressed Classes, etc that are fabricated through the collusion between the colonialists and casteists, in covert and overt ways, but also reads “the history” of the caste based marginalized communities as a caste-free Buddhist past.<sup>153</sup> Given the fact that Thass was an authority in Tamil literature, he digs deep to find evidences that would shore him up and mobilize others in reconstructing such a past.

However, Thass’s basis of historicizing *milechar* as Aryans and their migration from across the river Sind is depended on the migration theories of Aryans primarily that were in circulation at the early twentieth century. This readily available Aryan theory suits Thass as a way to understand the brahmins’s discrimination of other Indians in general, and Parayars in particular, as culturally and religiously different from themselves. Although Thass is constrained for want of historical specificities about Aryans as brahmins, vice-versa, his effort to read the history of India from within the sources available to the marginalized communities not only strengthens their agency but also opens new ways of interpreting and understanding their history and culture beyond caste and as part of collective community.

Thass’s influence among the marginalized such as Parayar and others was more effective through his effort to combine, what Bernard Williams insisted in the context of genealogy i.e., narratives of and about cultural phenomenon: that “everyday truths” (mostly incontestable facts

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<sup>153</sup> For a detailed investigation of the collusion between brahmins and colonialists and the resultant marginalization of Dalits and women see Viswanathan *Outside the Fold*, 235.

of every day life) and “interpretive historical narratives” (involving complex interpretations) come together.<sup>154</sup> That is, the everyday life practices of the Parayars including the values of inclusiveness they cherish and the sufferings privileged castes bring to bear upon caste-free world views (such as Parayars’) by their practices of exclusion become foundational in Parayars’ narratives of their cultural history. One may not have access to the precise impact of this alternative historical articulation of the marginalized on the caste system or of Thass taking cognizance of their *being* as caste-free Buddhists. Nevertheless, one is able to see the radical narrative of his *Saritiram* (history) vis-à-vis the caste based popular mythologies and practices a century ago, when the upper castes and colonialists became a continuum whose worst victims were the Dalits.<sup>155</sup> What was claimed as Hindu then, such as, the gods Indra, were turned on their heads to reveal the indigenous Buddhist past and present. The cruelties of the upper-castes, especially the brahmins, came under detailed scrutiny and rejection of those marginalized by the caste system, such as Parayars—an unprecedented subversive effort in the Tamil speaking areas till then.<sup>156</sup>

That is, Thass attempting to investigate the ideas and practices that were claimed as the sole possession and privilege of the brahmins is in itself remarkable. Arguably, more radical is Thass writing that only through the rejection of the brahminical gods and goddesses one can

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<sup>154</sup> Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 9-10

<sup>155</sup> For similar arguments see Aloysius. G 1997 and Viswanath, Rupa 2006

<sup>156</sup> The Bakhti movement, which is supposed to have addressed the notion of god as castefree, could not actually do away with the caste system as such, nor could it do away with the burden of caste on the marginalized. At the most it only co-opted the “untouchables” as “untouchable devotees” of Hindu sects such as Saivism and Vaishnavism. For a critical reading of Bakhti see Thapar, Romila “Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity.” *Modern Asian Studies*. (1989) 23: 209-231

uncover the suppressed Buddhist past behind them.<sup>157</sup> Thass does this not by claiming any individual access to such knowledge. Rather he through *The Tamilar* makes it as a collective rebuttal of those who were denigrated by categories such as Parayar, through their realization that they were those who “spoke against” (*paraivorkal*) the pseudo-brahmins and those who did not kowtow (*paraayarkal*) to the brahmanical tricksters. This, they did, not because they saw themselves as converts to Buddhism, but because of their perception that they were followers of *Indirar*, the Buddha.

### **Real Brahmin Vedic Details**

Thass had written a thirteen episode titled Real Brahmin Vedic Details (*Etarta Piramana Vedanta Vivaram*) between September 2, 1908 and November 25, 1908 in *The Tamilar*, almost two years ahead of writing *Indira Tesa Saritiram*. *Vivaram* serves a double purpose for him: first, to produce a counter-point to his criticism, Pseudo Brahmin Vedas (*Vesha Piramana Vedantam*) that spoke about the pseudo-brahmins’ masquerade (discussed in the first chapter). Second, *Vivaram* serves as a polysemic narrative that talks about the evolution of Sanskrit and Tamil, the tenets of Buddhism, the Buddhist laity and learned, the inseparability of body and mind, Buddhist meanings of practices and terms that transcend borders, and the Tamil textual evidence for all such themes. However, *Vivaram*’s prime concern is to decastize the category of brahmin as it has come to be, that is, as an index that identifies caste-men who assume their higher status over all others. Particularly the brahmin men’s authority to fracture and define the

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<sup>157</sup> D. R. Nagaraj concludes carelessly, while examining Ambedkarism, that the marginalized communities’ (Dalits) interventions against Hinduism as “denying a real memory” and their Buddhist aspirations are merely “efforts to build a new memory.” See D. R. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet: A Study of the Dalit Movement in India*, (Bangalore: South Forum Press, 1993), 53.



non-brahmins as lower to them through privileges of exclusion and oppression and by setting categorical divisions among the non-brahmins as upper and lower groups.

In contrast, Thass talks about the real-brahmin as one who has understood the purpose of birth, sickness, senility, and death to feel one with humanity and serving it through ethical principles. In other words, Thass's real-brahmin stands for the values that any person could aspire to in this world and these values are meant for fellow humans in this world, in contrast to the pseudo-brahmins' caste-discrimination of others. To this extent *Vivaram* seeks to achieve equality of all humans and to emphasize the inalienability of humane action as the fundamental basis of human relations, not abstract notions of caste hegemony that are fundamentally inhuman. In this non-caste reading of human relations among Indians, as against caste prescriptions of domineering groups, Buddhism serves as the template for every episode of *Vivaram*. Instead of the theological or ritual aspects, however, Thass interprets Buddhism as a base to construct rational humanism (as opposed to the metaphysical notions of brahminism). Some explanations are due.

In the first part of *Vivaram* Thass writes that the Tamil term *vedam* (Vedas) is actually derived from Pali term *pedam*, which refer to Buddha's three sermons (*tiripeda vaakiyankal* / Tripitakas). He says that they are the actions of: non-violence (*papamseiyaamai*); compassion (*nanmaisei*); and cleansing the mind (*itayataisutisei*). These three principles for Thass had become Buddha's venerable sermons (*adivetam*).<sup>158</sup> He uses Tamil literatures *Seevakasintamani* and *Tirukkalambakam* that refer to *aadivetam* and *petam* respectively to explicate his conclusion. Interestingly, in Thass's interpretation, because Pali, the language of the Buddha, remained an oral language, Sanskrit and Tamil came into being as written languages through Pannini and

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<sup>158</sup> With the same title Thass wrote his most important book, which is kept in many Buddhist Viharas of Tamil Buddhists today and referred to constantly with reverence.

Agastiyar respectively in order to spread the *adivetam* of Buddha. He relates Pannini and Agastiyar as direct disciples of Buddha. Here it is important to note that Thass's understanding and interpretations of Buddhism are sub-continental in nature while recognizing its regional distribution through various languages and linguistic territories.<sup>159</sup> To substantiate his claims he takes the instance of the eleventh century Buddhist text *Veeracholiam*, which talks about the northern language i.e., Sanskrit (*vadamoli*) and southern language i.e., Tamil (*tenmoli*) as those bestowed upon Pannini and Kudamuni (Agastiyar) through Buddha.<sup>160</sup>

Furthermore, explaining the details of Buddha's *adivetam*, Thass says that the three ethical principles of non-violence, compassion, and wisdom stand on four more actions—right conduct (*aram*), right-meaning (*porul*), right-pleasure (*inbam*), and emancipation (*veedu*), which are collectively called as four-ways (*naanmarai* in Tamil and *chaturmarai* in Sanskrit). In turn, these four-ways are further made comprehensible by providing eight explanations for each through the guide, *upanitchayaarutankal* in Tamil, *upanidatam* in Pali, *upanishadukal* (Upanishads) in Sanskrit, which makes it thirty-two in all.<sup>161</sup> Because these practices are holistic and schematic those who want to comprehend the meanings of Buddhist ethics and experience its veracity need to live in-between the country and forest (*kaatirkum naatirkum matiyil*); thus came the Buddhist Viharas (*indiraviyarankal*). The Viharas are for those who renounced home, lived with a golden robe and a begging bowl, and practiced *seelam* (Buddhist ethical ways of life) in

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<sup>159</sup> T September 2, 1908.

<sup>160</sup> T September 9, 1908.

<sup>161</sup> T September 9, 1908 and September 23, 1908.

order to gain wisdom and become the learned. Only such people come to be known as *arahant* in Pali, *brahminar* in Sanskrit, and *antanar* in Tamil, Thass says.<sup>162</sup>

How is this Buddhist ethics connected with realities of body and mind? Thass says a body that is alive (*uyirudal*) with qualities such as birth, death, growth, constraints, parting, coming together, disposition, indisposition, and generosity joining with qualities of objects that are not alive, such as, shapes, color, tastes, smell, and various physical states, makes the body and life come together (*otrumai*) to make a human. If they are separate (*vetrumai*), that is, if life becomes inactive in a body, or if the body is not active through life, then it is not a human. Using Buddhism what Thass attempts to emphasize is that whether it is soul or mind (*aatma*) or person (*aanma*) it is conditioned and contained only within and through the human body and not apart from it. This is made clear when he says, “only when the body came into being, the very notion of *aatma* came into being, otherwise it is redundant.”<sup>163</sup>

Thass’s understanding of the human body and mind is in direct contrast to the confusions of the brahminical notions of *aanma* which is privileged and provided with metaphysical meaning as mentioned in the first chapter.<sup>164</sup> Prioritizing the body, Thass goes on to elucidate the role of mind. Stating that the mind progresses from mere thinking to wisdom in the live-human-body, Thass uses the Tamil text *Kaakaipadiyam* to stress that this progression of mind is possible in one and all.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> T September 23, 1908.

<sup>163</sup> T September 30, 1908.

<sup>164</sup> See Chapter One pp.41, 42, and 43.

<sup>165</sup> Thinking originates in a live-body (*Udaluyirporuta lullantondri*)

Turning into mind (*Kadalulavirive manamena vaaindu*)

Undergoing this transformation of body and mind is possible to anyone who maintains good conduct. However, in order to have a better understanding of life a man has to have the guidance of a guru (*antanar*), who will provide the tools of vision (*udavivili*) to see the truth in this world. When one understands the world better, then, one becomes a seer (*meiyan*). This state when achieved will be known as nirvana (*nirvananilai*). Thass says this will be equal to the fruit of tamarind, which separates into shell and fruit when ripened, yet remains together. He uses this metaphor to point out that even though the body and life remain together they both reach a different state through the attainment of wisdom.<sup>166</sup>

Those who could attain such wisdom about humanity, through the control of one's body and mind, become recognized as *antanar* i.e., guru, and are identified as such by the sacred thread they wear. Thass explains the symbolism behind the sacred thread: that it replicates the breath controlled in a fetus through the umbilical cord that runs from the left chest over to the right back to join in the navel (*kopulukai*) to mark those who have come to control their senses that will benefit themselves and humanity. He does not, therefore, interpret the sacred thread as a mark and self-proclamations of one's caste-birth, exclusionary spirituality, and privileged position in society. Rather, he views it as a result and sign of others' cognizance of one's equanimity and endorsement of the continuity of such persons.<sup>167</sup> This is also, according to Thass, a sign of one attaining the seventh stage of humanity, that is, evolving from plants, to

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Expanding into knowledge through contestation (*Vaadavirimanmaal matiyenapperuki*)

Strengthening people to wisdom (*Tidamperu varuvaar tevarakinare*)

*T* September 30, 1908.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> *T* October 7, 1908.

worms, to fishes, to birds, to animals, to man, to man of wisdom / emancipated being. Attaining this stage also means for Thass that one has understood the *veda antam* (ends of Veda i.e., the three principles of non-violence, good-conduct, and cleansed-mind, and *brahmum* i.e., sensitivity to other and fellow beings. Only when one gains such as a state of mind and practice does one become a *brahman* i.e., a compassionate being.<sup>168</sup> However, using the Tamil text Patinatar that talks about the facile nature of brahminical self-deception through rituals such as compulsory bathing, sacred thread, and reciting slogans when one does not even know how to step out of the river one is in, Thass distinguishes the Buddhist ways of becoming a person of wisdom for oneself and others.<sup>169</sup>

Viewing the Buddha as an exemplar of non-violence, compassion, and wisdom (i.e., *veda antam*) Thass cites various Tamil texts as evidence of the Buddha being recognized as god (*kadavul*, *saami*, and *devan*). Likewise he says that the words *maal* and *tirumaal* that are currently used to refer to the god Vishnu, *sivan* that is currently in use for the god Siva / Shiva, and *brahmun* that currently refers to the brahminical god Brahma, originally stood for the Buddha. One can see that Thass is trying to de-Hinduize the religious terms that were circulating then. Nevertheless, more than eulogizing Buddha, his project aims to answer the question “who is a real brahmin?” He concludes that only those who could transcend birth, disease, senility, and death become real brahmins.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Thass quotes *Tirukural* “Antanan is a man of wisdom, who abjures harming other beings” (*antanannenbo raravormatrevuyirkunj sentana maipoondolukalal*) and *Seevakasintamani* Tamil texts to substantiate his views. *T* October 14, 1908.

<sup>169</sup> *T* October 21, 1908.

<sup>170</sup> *T* November 25, 1908.

Thus, the Vedic details that Thass draws on in order to describe a real brahmin is an effort to provide an alternative view to what he saw as the brahminical distortions that he exposes in the pseudo brahmin vedas, as mentioned in chapter one. Interestingly, his narrative in the *Vivaram* does not make any reference to brahmins as a community and their harmful impacts on Indian society through caste. Rather, Thass makes an effort to piece together the elementary aspects of Buddhist practices that have spread widely in the Indian/Tamil societies. In addition, *vivaram* serves as a narrative for demystifying the notions of god and practices associated with them in the present. The profusion of evidence in Tamil literature was to support the critical refashioning of the Indian religio-cultural history through the prism of Buddhism.

Did Thass contrive Buddhism among Tamils through his *Indira Tesa Saritiram* and *Etarta Piramana Vedanta Vivaram*? Thass's iconoclastic reading of the Indian history might tempt his interlocutors, given the predominance of brahminical Hindu way of interpreting India, to see his views far removed from conventional understanding of the Indian society and history. Since *The Tamilan*'s orientation was more in the direction of providing explanations from literary sources, deriving historical interpretations through them could have made Thass's views more challengeable. However, considering the etiological methods of history around the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' India, especially with the infusion of religious philology and ethnology, Thass steer's clear off both Orientalist and brahminical extrapolations on the marginalized communities in order to script an original perception from "within." Needless to say, Thass's interpretive methods and evidences involved a fusion of philosophical concepts of Buddhism, Buddhist geographical locations, Buddhist metaphysical descriptions, and Buddhist literatures that were poetic and thus fictional. Nevertheless, Thass's narratives evoke the possibilities for the *The Tamilan* readers that they too could historicize their experience

outside the fold of caste imaginatively. However, one needs to examine the practicality of such rebuilding of Buddhism in real life religious experiences of people, especially among the marginalized who he portrays as standing against brahminism. Thass's did not hesitate to embark upon such efforts in *The Tamilan*.

### **Parayars as Tamil Buddhists**

Thass writes about the ways in which caste and religious divisions in the Tamil speaking regions take various forms according to the whims and fancies of a person. That is, if someone with a name Kuppusami who has no caste surname or second name, later on becomes a Kuppusami Chettiyar connoting a business caste identity, then the same person could also become Kuppusami Iyer, connoting a brahmin identity. Thass points to such changes of one's caste-free name into a caste bearing identity by appending a caste's name to one's own name, as having the effect of converting the freedom to pursue any vocation into a choice-denying confinement to a caste-prescribed vocation, with its exclusive privileges and lack thereof. Thass's observations are in tandem with the genesis of census since 1870's in the Madras presidency, which legitimized such rigidities. Having criticized this formation of caste identities in civil society, Thass pioneers, the revival of linguistic identities in order to counter the hierarchies of caste—even religious divisions—among Indians. Particularly he wants people to embrace Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, and Marathi as forms of regional linguistic identities as a counter to caste and religion.<sup>171</sup>

However, Thass does not see the regional linguistic formations as all-peaceful arrangement of identities either. Indeed, he says, “as the writing and speaking happens more and

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<sup>171</sup> *T* February 19, 1908.

more, the linguistic divisions will become sharper, while the caste divisions recede.” Therefore he says, “because the aspiration for linguistic identity will bring together all those who divide themselves into upper and lower castes as Tamils, they will gain education and professional advancement at the personal level, even if they fail to commit themselves at the national (India’s) reforms.”<sup>172</sup> This explains why Thass’s Buddhism becomes regionalized as Tamil Buddhism, in keeping with his reliance on and treating Tamil Texts as sources of historical evidence.

It is important to note that Thass settles for linguistic identities as a way out of caste by default, as he says above, since caste has vitiated segmentation of Indians and preempted the possibility of a non-hierarchical prosperity for all. If caste is a means to fracture Indians and to ensure the progress of upper caste groups exclusively, then linguistic connections that linked various castes could supplant hierarchies and bring them into horizontal collectivities in Thass’s reasoning.<sup>173</sup> Furthermore, since he views Indian history as history of linguistic formations, since ancient times, Thass does not hesitate to revive them as antidotes to the caste system. This linguistic revivalism, however, is not a neo-classical desire for linguistic renaissance; rather, it is a response to the persistence of caste, as is Thass’s project behind Buddhism.<sup>174</sup>

Thass historicizing Tamil language and Buddhism in tandem is not to demonstrate his “emotional attachment” to Tamil or part of “the process of making of a mother tongue” out of Tamil, as Lisa Mitchell argues in the context of Telugu language and the formation of the state of Andhra Pradesh in the twentieth century India. In fact, it is not what Sumathi Ramaswamy—

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Such a position is clearly anti-thetical to Dumontian and Moffattian functionalist notions of hierarchy, of viewing caste as a cultural resource of Indians.

<sup>174</sup> For a short but perceptive reading of Thass’s embracing Buddhism. See Raj Gowthaman, *Ka. Iyothethassar Aaivugal*, (Nagercoil: Kalachuvadu Pathippagam, 2004).



who *identifies* herself as a “brahmin” in the first page of her book—writes as passion for *tamilpparru* i.e., “devotion to Tamil” of various caste and religious groups. Rather it was deeply immersed in what Mitchell writes as pertinent questions that need to be posed about the late nineteenth century South India: “First, how was the very concept of subject changing... And second, how were the methods of representing subjects also undergoing transformations?” but she only finds partial answers in the form “alliances” among competing caste and religious groups. In other words, diverse linguistic identities coming together or even competing with each other under the umbrella of Buddhism for Thass is to relinquish caste identities and divisions and Hindu bigotry that have favored only privileged groups, such as brahmins, more than anybody else.<sup>175</sup> Arguably, beyond linguistic passion and establishment of caste alliances, and becoming a devotee of Tamil, Thass’s Tamil renaissance is Buddhist renaissance and his Buddhist renaissance is Tamil renaissance in modern South India. This Tamil Buddhist renaissance is meant to usher in a radical modernism that goes beyond welcoming scientific and industrial inventions to change the economic conditions of the poor and marginalized in India but also break the barriers of caste and religion in order to transform and create new communities of humanism that hitherto could come into existence.

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<sup>175</sup> In fact, Mitchell’s conclusion that “the motives of those who were not likely to gain increased access to education, government jobs, and similar opportunities with the creation of the new state are more difficult to explain and have not been adequately accounted for by existing literature on either the Andhra movement or linguistic nationalism,” and her question “what could create such an investment in a separate Telugu linguistic state that so many non-elites and non-literates would be passionate enough about its achievement that they would be willing to sacrifice their lives?” are only partially explained by her observations that the answer could be found in the Andhra movement leader Potti Sriramullu’s Gandhian fasts for the “social uplift of the Dalits.” Thus the Dalits’ perception of the relations between Telugu and Telugus, and how they see themselves within them is not made visible. Instead Dalits’ death is explained merely in terms of their *devotion* to the upper caste Andhra movement leader. Lisa Mitchell, *Language, Emotion, and Politics in South India – The Making of a Mother Tongue*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 13, 15, 205, and 218.

Furthermore, constitutive to Thass's championing a linguistic solution to the caste problem is his views on the rapacity of caste in economic, spatial, and anglophone terms. That is, he considers caste as the reason for the inflation of food prices such as that of rice (*arisi*), lentils (*tuvarai*), and millets (*kelvaragu*), due to the landlords' greed behind the mono-cropping of peanuts as a cash-crop. Thass connects the prosperity resulting from cash crops as a benefit only to the upper castes and an evidence of the selfish motives (*suyapirayosangkaruti*) of upper caste *swadesis*. This is a simultaneous indictment of the collusion of upper caste landlords and the exploitative colonial policies. In addition, Thass argues that while the rural areas succumb to the growing of cash crops such as peanuts, the urban areas are consumed by the pretensions of the upper caste *swadesis*' diatribes (*swadesikalendru koochalittukkundu*) against foreign goods. In both urban and rural India the victims of the upper caste *swadesis* are the poor (*elaikal*)—who are also mostly the marginalized/lower caste communities. In addition, Thass exposes the irony of those who claim themselves to be *swadesis*, clamoring for the status of anglophones, instead of speaking in one's own tongue (*avaravar suya pashaikalil vishayankali vilakki*). In fact, he views aspirations for a person with a B.A to become a lawyer, or an M.A to become a teacher, or an F.A to become a writer (clerk) as betraying selfishness and a lack of concern for those who have suffered deprivations. True to such educational aspirations of the upper castes, he says, those who are unemployed with such degrees hanker after and become *swadesis* and organize meetings only to indulge in emptiness (*dumbam*), since these meetings are meant to celebrate speeches that are bombastic (*peria peria vartaikalai pesinar*)—and grammatically correct but do not debate the content of their speech.<sup>176</sup> If the content mattered, Thass argued, they ought to

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<sup>176</sup> Thass's position here is similar to C L R James's critical view of historians in the context of slavery and racism when he says, "they wrote so well because they saw so little." See C. L. R.

speak and resolve in the vernacular, and publish in the same. Only when such efforts are made by those who read and reflect (*kandunarvorkalukku*) in their own languages, Thass concludes, that integrity and prosperity would become possible.<sup>177</sup> Thass's disavowal of anglophone *swadesis* (as a corollary) translates into his appeal for conducting economic and social changes through various Indian languages.<sup>178</sup>

In this context, as seen before in the previous sections of this chapter and in the first chapter, Thass enunciates the term *tiravidam* (Dravidian) in two interchangeable senses, i.e., as a term that stands for the Tamil language in South India—apart from Kannada, Telugu, and Marashtaka [sic],—as well as a term that refers to South Indian communities in general that are distinct from the Aryans.<sup>179</sup> More importantly, through these two senses of Dravidian, Thass attempts to unpack the history of the caste-categories *panchamar* and *parayar* to argue that they are neither; rather, they are actually Tamil/Dravidian Buddhists.

Regarding the *panchamars*, Thass traces the emergence of this term to around 1870s. During this time he says that the caste-discriminating folk-theatre—*dambachari vilasam*, probably a troupe of brahmins—advertized that the *panchamars* are prohibited from attending its performances. In turn, the “caste-free Dravidians” (*saatipetamatra tiravidarkal*), through their

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James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1989 [1938]), x.

<sup>177</sup> *T* February 26, 1908.

<sup>178</sup> Similar views engaged the non-brahmin Tamils against anglophone brahmins. See Bernard Bate, *Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aesthetic: Democratic Practice in South Asia*, (New York: Columbia Press, 2009).

<sup>179</sup> *T* December 7, 1910 and December 4, 1912. In fact, the category Dravidian, in the racial sense, is ambiguously positioned in Thass's writings to talk about the whole of South India as well as to refer to those who he views as casteless Tamils, particularly the Parayars, in contrast to the caste-Aryans. Also, Thass unveils Tamil literatures based historicity of the term Dravidian and community associated with it, even as he refers to Caldwell (1913) on this.

magazines,<sup>180</sup> demanded explanations for the term *panchamar*; wondering whether this term would refer to such people as descendants of *pandavas* (because of the phonetic resemblance between the two), whether it refers to those who lived around the five rivers (since *pancha* means five in Tamil—actually derived from Sanskrit and other north Indian languages—whether they are the five communities descended from Brahma, whether they flew like cotton (since *panchu* in Tamil also means cotton), whether it refers to them as poor (since *pancha* would also mean poverty in Tamil), or whether it refers to them as people who had the expertise on five-knowledges (*panchapootiyankal*). Because there was no response to such demands for explanation and protest against such careless usages, the casteless-Draavidians sent a letter in 1891 to the Congress committee stating that they were actually “original Draavidians” (*poorvika dravidarkal*), and followed it up in 1892 with a memorandum to the Madras Mahajanasabha that those who are called by the upper castes as Parayars, Saambaans, and right-hand castes should only be addressed as “original Draavidians”—as mentioned in the first chapter. Thass says both went unheeded.

On the other hand, Thass holds the British responsible for the further spread of the terms *parayar* and *panchamar* through their policies. For instance, he says, since even school children were opposed to the imposition of the category Parayars, the British should have named the free schools that they started for the “poor-families” (*eliya-kulattukku*) as “the free school for the casteless poor children.” Instead, Thass says that the British listened to those (upper caste members) who were anathema and enemies (*etirikalakavum satrurukkalakavum*) of these poor communities should have named their schools *panchama* schools. As if to be absolutely clear as

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<sup>180</sup> Though he does not mention the names of these magazines, the early publication history of marginalized communities is well known. See Ponnoviam, Anbu, “Prologue” in Aloysius *Iyotheethasar Sinthanaigal-I*.

to who the poor communities and their enemies were, Thass writes that they are respectively, those “Dravidian Buddhists” who were oppressed for more than one thousand and five hundred years by their enemies, the “pseudo-brahmins” i.e., the brahmins.<sup>181</sup> It is important to note here that Thass alludes to the influence that brahmins had in propagating derogatory caste-names against the Parayars on their own as well as thorough the British. Thus Thass offers insights into how the casteism, aligning itself with and influencing the colonial machinery further vitiated the conditions of the marginalized.

Although Thass views the British as a factor in the spread of caste indignities, he acknowledges some generousities on their part for starting free schools for the poor as well as investigating the rivalry between those who were categorized as Parayars and those who glorified themselves as brahmins. For instance, he talks about one engineer W. Arrington of Saanaarakkuppam who was learning Tamil from two brahmins in 1853, and was intrigued by the brahmins’ complaint that the British official’s employees were Parayar, the lower castes, and untouchables (*talta saatiyaar niicharkal*), and that they had risen up in life because of the officer’s patronage. Since, Arlington was puzzled by the audacity of the brahmins in complaining about his own servants, he called his butlers Kandasami and Krishnappan as well as the brahmins for a discussion. Thass writes that Kandasami admitted that he did not know all the reasons for the age-old rivalry between them, i.e., Parayars and the brahmins even though he had witnessed the brahmins being chased away from their villages, cow-dung-water being sprinkled and the pot carrying it broken on the brahmin’s trails order to cleanse their habitation that had resulted from the intrusion of a bramin into their space. However, Kandasami added that a

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<sup>181</sup> T March 3, 1909. W E B Du Bois also uses the phrase Dravidian Buddhists in order to make racial connections between Africa and India, that Buddha could also be seen as having African features such as corn hair. See Bill Mullen and Cathryn Watson, *W E B Du Bois on Asia: Crossing the World Color Line*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005).

majority of his people lived by agriculture, whereas the majority of the brahmins lived by receiving alms (priesthood), and asked Arlington to decide which was a more dignified way of living. Fearing that Arlington might probe this further, Thass writes, the brahmins distracted him back into Tamil lessons. Thass laments that even though Arlington was convinced that the brahmins dodged the discussion, there was none to convince him that it were only the brahmins who ruined the “original Buddhism” (*poorva Buddha markam*) and reduced the Buddhists as lower to them caste-wise, and as *Paraayar* (i.e., those who do not support caste) and *Parayar* (i.e., those who speak against caste).<sup>182</sup>

Along similar lines to his writing on the linkages between the *panchamar* and *parayar* and their Buddhist past, Thass investigates the implications of the British elevation of the Hinduism over other religions, especially Buddhism. For instance, he rebukes Lord Morley, the Viceroy of India, for not following emperor Edward the VII’s earlier instruction that the Hindus should only be given some administrative power positions in India until the poor communities (*elai kudikal*) who have been oppressed within that category—as the British had assumed as such—were on a level playing field in all aspects (*sakalavishayankalilum samarasanilaikku*). Instead Thass says that Morley overlooked the petitions of many in India and declared India as the land of Hindus, and thus had forfeited and disenfranchised others, including Muslims.<sup>183</sup>

Noting that there is none to heed the calls of “important communities,” such as the Parayars, they remain oppressed, Thass comments that had Morley cared to investigate the communities brought under the label Hindus, he would have understood the caste, religious,

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<sup>182</sup> *T* March 10, 1909.

<sup>183</sup> Thass views the Muslims as indigenous religion of India, and the Muslim rule, during various times, as something that stood against the brahmins and the caste oppression, unlike the British rule.

linguistic, and characteristic differences and discriminating practices among them, and would not have offered executive membership in the viceroy's council to them. For instance, he ridicules the methods of such caste classification that if one were to ask the caste of somebody and if that person says that "he" is the caste that applies ash on the forehead (*pattara saati*), that bangs one's head on the floor (*mootra saati*), that knuckles one's head (*kottra saati*), then he is declared as an upper caste. Whereas if a casteless Dravidian does not answer anything about caste, since he does not believe in caste, then, he is declared a "Paraayan and *Parayar*" in order to oppress (*nasituvaruvatu*) him as one who belongs to a lower caste. Stating that the six million original—caste-free—Dravidians should not be relegated to the whims of such casteists' classifications, he further argues that were the British government to relinquish their responsibility in this matter, they would all perish under the yoke of the upper castes. Thass expresses puzzlement at Morley's unconcern for the poor (*elaikalin meetu ithakkam*).<sup>184</sup>

Thus Thass's criticism of and theses on the categories *Panchamar*, *Paraayar*, and *Parayar* results in two conclusions that are not directly related with each other: (a) through his systematic examination of these categories Thass says that they were created by the upper castes to dehistoricize the "original Dravidian Buddhists" (b) Thass points out that the British accepting these categories as instructed by the upper caste terms, when they were establishing schools and administrative positions for Indians, have only given legitimacy to the upper caste views of lower castes, especially the most marginalized. Because the upper castes have stood against the lower castes in the pre-colonial times, and since the upper castes have gained more power during the British colonialism, it is significant that Thass rules out any scope for a transformation either in the conditions of the oppressed poor during the British rule or the end of caste particularly

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<sup>184</sup> *T* March 3, 1909.

through the upper caste Indians entering the British administration. On the contrary, Thass urges that the British officials ought to do more for those oppressed by the upper castes. Thass is arguably emboldened to directly appeal to the British because the upper castes themselves had indifferently left “dealing with the Parayars” to the British administration (as we saw in the Madras Mahajana Sabha’s meeting in the first chapter), and since the British were amenable to some form of relief against the caste oppression by providing education and jobs for the marginalized. Thus, Thass contends that the oppressed of the caste reposed more trust on the British than on the upper castes, even as they express their dismay at not enough being done—this also explains why the marginalized communities and those who stood against the caste system and the brahminical power later, such as Ambedkar, expected more policies and programs from the British officials of the late colonialism than from the upper castes.

In fact, the “anti-brahminical” views have been prevalent in South India and Ceylon since the middle of the nineteenth century<sup>185</sup>— although what is usually noticed is the non-brahmin upper caste positions against the brahmins, and not the marginalized communities’ anti-caste practices that took the brahmins and non-brahmin upper castes to tasks. Apart from the non-brahmin upper castes’ differences with the brahmins, the missionaries also played a stellar role in expanding the terrain of criticism against brahminism in order to find more converts to Christianity, as was their wont. Nevertheless, the missionaries’ denunciation of the brahmins, in Ceylon for instance, was due “not merely as the jealous custodians of antiquity but also as the villains who imposed Sanscritization upon the Tamils.” In addition, the missionaries were also driven by “stirrings of cultural discontent and a search for the pristine Tamil identity thought to

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<sup>185</sup> For more details regarding this see Blackburn, *Print* and Young and S. Jebanesan, *The Bible Trembled*.



have existed prior to brahminization.”<sup>186</sup> In contrast, Thass’s anti-brahminical theses differ from the above in the sense that they were not for the discovery of any “pristine Tamil identity,” or a “golden age of Tamils” in a hoary past that cannot be historically and ethically explained. Furthermore, since Thass has a critical view of their activities in the sub-continent for not turning Christianity against the problem of caste by keeping the marginalized communities’ vantage point, the missionaries could not have inspired the anti-caste thoughts in Thass. Instead, Thass tries to debunk the stranglehold of brahminism and pejorative notions on the Parayars and other communities (since they are immanent) by reviving and reconstructing the Buddhist views of India. Not by evoking the ritual Buddhism vis-à-vis the brahminism, but by elucidating the ethical elements that make the barriers of caste redundant. The Parayars, therefore, are not seen either as belonging to a religious group i.e., as saivites / vaishnavites / Hindus, nor as a group that partakes or celebrates ethnicity unmediated by anti-caste ethics. Rather for Thass Buddhist ethics has mediated the identity of the Parayars, which in turn has enabled their collective living with other Buddhists in the Tamil speaking region as well as in the subcontinent unhinged by caste. This is also the reason why Thass writes about the Buddhist origins of the Parayars as a pre-condition to their Indian, Dravidian, and Tamil identities.

However, knowing full well that the battle against caste needed to go beyond the developmental initiatives that might accrue from the British, the marginalized continued to deconstruct many of the caste cultural markers and practices of the Hindus in order to assert that they were originally Buddhists. This is to convince themselves and those who partake in the anti-caste community formation in South India that understanding the pre-caste-history of the Parayars and the revival of Tamil Buddhism are one and the same. Most importantly, they

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<sup>186</sup> Young and Jebanesan, *The Bible Trembled*, 70.

believed that such a revival had the potential for the reconstruction of the caste-free history of the marginalized.<sup>187</sup> This takes many forms in the writings of Thass, one of which was to demystify the mythologies behind various deities in South India.

### **The Buddhist Deities**

Thass inquires into the gods and goddesses and the icons associated with the upper castes that were presumed to be a part of saivite or vaishnavite traditions in the Tamil speaking areas as well as in the Indian subcontinent as a whole. By using Tamil literary evidences of *Manimekalai*, *Nanavetti*, and *Sivavaakiyar* he unravels them as originally referring to Buddha and Buddhists and their cultural practices. Furthermore, Thass observes that many of the religious stories associated with Hindu denominations i.e., saivism and vaishnavism, are embodiment of not only distorted Buddhism but are also caricatures of rivalry among them.

For instance, Thass interprets the *lingam* as an icon of Buddha with a different sense of purpose originally, instead of accepting it as an idol representing the god Siva, who in this form symbolizes copulation and regeneration. He argues that the term *lingam* stands, on the one hand, for Buddha and his followers' success in ethical control of their minds and bodies, and to go beyond death (*parinirvana*), and for the celebratory rituals of Buddha in pagodas (Buddhist places of worship) and of others who followed him through marking their graves with stones (*adaiyalakkal naati*), on the other. In due course the word *ankalingam*, referring to those who rose up to the level of the Buddha, became distorted as *lingam* by pseudo-brahmins. These brahmins, Thass said, desecrated the Buddhist pagodas by building temples over them and by

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<sup>187</sup> The anti-caste Tamil Buddhist revival is a contrast to Tamil Purist movement of Vedachalam and others, which reinscribed casteism ironically, even as they attacked brahmins for the casteism and imposing Sudra status, i.e., lower caste status on Saiva-Vellalas. See Vedachalam, *Velalar Nakareekam*.

placing an idol of copulation at the center and explaining that *ankam* meant body, *lingam* meant male-organ, *ikiyam* meant female-organ, and together they stood for the source of reproduction; and thus, they created *lingamatam*, the religion of lingam Thass mockingly concludes. In addition, he points to the religious rivalry (*madappor*) that exists even between saivites and vaishnavites, who denigrate each other's gods and actions, and he appeals for the end of such bigotry.<sup>188</sup>

Likewise, the history of the god *Murugan* comes under Thass's examination. Instead of viewing Murugan as a saivite god, as a son of Siva, Thass interprets him as a Buddhist king of the Palani hills, who was known for his valor and technological skills, and was a son of Marugan and Gangai. To substantiate his claim that Murugan was a king of the hilly zone called *kurinchi*, and who lived a thousand years after the Buddha (i.e., around 500AD), Thass says that his conclusions are based on Tamil literary evidence such as Illangovaaadikal's *silappatikaram*, Veerai Mandalavan's *pinkalinikandu*, Buddhamitran's *veeracholiam*, Kaakaipadiniyar's *naaraikuravanchi*, and Nakkeeran's *tirumurukartruppada*.<sup>189</sup>

Apart from demystifying the popular interpretations of some saivite gods, Thass examines the widespread prevailing notions about the goddess Amman in the Tamil speaking areas and reconstructs her history as a *Bhikkuni* (a Buddhist nun). He says that Amman was

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<sup>188</sup> *T* February 11, 1908 and March 18, 1908. It is relevant here to note that Vedachalam's *Tamilar Matam* (Tamils' Religion), which was published in 1941, has narrative structure, I hasten to say, that purports to counter Thass's anti-caste views on Tamils as Buddhists preceding by a quarter century. This is in order to legitimize upper caste Saiva Vellalas as authentic Tamils, while reducing eighteen communities that labor for the Vellalas as lower castes and menial job doers.

<sup>189</sup> *T* February 19, 26, and March 4, 1908.

actually Ambikadevi, born to the Buddhist king Sundiravaku of Pukanaadu, and she became a renowned Buddhist nun in her teens for preaching Buddhism and practicing medicine for the relief from epidemics in Tamilnadu (Tamils' country). Thass cites the Chola territory salt-field village Vadivancheri Buddhist Vihara (*Cholanaattu uppala kiramum Vaduvancheri Buddhist viyaram*), Nagai territory's Verkanni or Velaankanni Mutt, and Mayavarm (now known as Mayiladuturai) Mutupetai Vanduraivaal Avvaiyar Kovil that are devoted for Amman worship as evidence, to corroborate his interpretation that she was a Buddhist nun.<sup>190</sup>

Thass weaves a complex story of Amman connecting Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity in relation to the famous pilgrimage centre Velaankanni (in Nagai district of Tamil Nadu) as it is currently known. Holding the *milecher*, the pseudo-brahmin outsiders, as the persecutors of the Buddhists in the Tamil speaking zone, Thass says, some Buddhists in Trichirappalli and Nagai escaped to Jaffna (in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka), while those who remained became Muslims in Nagai Naadu. Once this happened, the pseudo-brahmins stole the golden Buddhist idols from Nagai Buddhist Viharas to make money and to convert the Buddhist vihara of *Sri Arankarmadam* or *Alakamadam* into a temple town called Sri Rangam in Trichirappalli. He says the books about these idols and the Tamil poet *Tirumankaialwar*'s history tell the story that he has narrated.<sup>191</sup>

Meanwhile, the Portuguese immigrants (*kudiyeriyavarkal*) were surprised to see people from distant villages thronging to Velkanni Amman Viyaram in Nagai, and proceeded to establish their own *kovil* (temple), i.e., a cathedral. Thass indicts the Portuguese for

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<sup>190</sup> T August 21 and September 18, 25, 1907.

<sup>191</sup> T September 25, 1907.

appropriating people's donations and not spending for their welfare. He cites references in Tamil literatures to narrate the Portuguese history and Verkani (Velaankani) idol history.<sup>192</sup>

Elaborating the brahmin impact on the Buddhists, Thass says: “not only did they disfigure the Buddhist Viharas (*Indira viyaranakal*), changed the Buddhist devotional aspects, and denigrated those who followed *dhamma* as lowly (*talti*), but these outsiders influenced the immigrants [colonialists] with such vilification.”<sup>193</sup> In Thass's views a crucial part of the outsiders' disparagement, upper castes and colonialists alike, of the Buddhists is making them believe in Amman worship under the neem/margosa tree (*vembu*) that is dependent on animal sacrifice (cattle, goat, and chicken) and alcohol, as they did with the worship of Muniandavan (another name for Buddha) worship under the peepul tree.<sup>194</sup> Citing the Tamil twelfth century text *nanavetti*, which says that “in Chola territory those who were named Parayar were forced to eat dead-cattle,” Thass argues that even the dead-cattle eating habits are also, in fact, the doings of the *paraaya saatiyor* (outside groups) in order to establish the filth of caste structure (*kasimala saatikattukalinaal*) over the ethical living of the Buddhists.

Thass appeals for the revival of Amman thoughts (*sintanaikal*), as they are Buddhist in nature, in the Tamil villages for two reasons: first, because the animal sacrifice to assuage Kannakai's (known as Kannaki, the wife of Kovalan in the Tamil epic *Silappatikaaram*) anger for the loss her husband and destruction of Madurai and a thousand men was transposed on to the worship of Amman by craftiness. This practice has to be done away with; second, because

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<sup>192</sup> *T* September 25, 1907.

<sup>193</sup> *T* September 25, 1907.

<sup>194</sup> Muniandavan is a widely followed god in Tamil villages today. Note the first chapter discussion on the Madaras Mahajana Sabha members appropriating this god and claiming it as their gift to the marginalized goes well with Thass' conclusions about the brahminical impact. See Chapter One, pp.8-9

Amman is actually the Tamil poetess Avvai who wrote about avoiding meat, killing, and stealing in *tiruvacakam* (approximately thirteenth century) true to her Buddhist values, and therefore, will not accept animal sacrifice. The story of Amman comes to an end with Thass's bold claims and emphasis, "it was not *Kannakai*, who took the vow to remain the guardian of the villages. Rather, it was Avvai, widely known as Ambikai, who pledged to be the angel of the villages, of the community (*kulam*), village-guard, village-amman, and cleansed the epidemics (*kodumaariyai akatri*) and made the people strong. Those who think of her should actually think of the Buddhist values of abjuring lies, killing, stealing, debauchery, and alcohol. Only when we think of the angel of peace through the Buddhist values (*saanta-seelam*), that our villages and our lives in general will be better."<sup>195</sup>

The purpose of Thass's narration of the histories of the gods and goddesses (by relying on the literary texts that composed of poetic and non-fictional elements) is to achieve the twin purpose of confronting upper caste Hindu claims as well as to question the practices of the marginalized, for which he refashions them through their supposed Buddhist antecedents. This re-reading of non-Tamil Indian and Tamil religious sources could be said to be Thass' original attempt to reconstruct the history of caste as a history of the contention between the upper castes and the Buddhists. He rejects the claim that the establishment of caste was the result of victory of a 'superior' over 'inferior' people. Instead, he views caste as the dross (*kalimalam*) contributed by those who lack humanity. Here his references to anti-caste Tamil texts such as *nanavetti* helps him to explain Buddhism as a counter-current to caste.

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<sup>195</sup> *T* October 9, 1907.

### Pongal, Deepavali, and Kartikai as Buddhist festivals

Thass quotes *Manimekalai*, which says “the auspicious day when the mind got liberated...” (*matinaan mutriya mangalattirunaal*) to appeal to his Buddhist brothers (*sakyakula sakotirarkalae sattru kavaniyunkal*) that the festival known as Sankaranti or Bohip Pongal in South India was actually a festival in honor of Buddha attaining *nirvana*. In order to stake his claims as eminently persuasive, he explains the reasons behind why Buddha is referred to as *sankarar*: that his sermons were known as *dharma* (*dhamma*), the gathering of his followers was known as *sangam* (*sanga*), and since they followed the three principles of *Buddha, Dhamma, and Sanga*, the Buddha was known as *sanka-arar, sankar-mitirar, sanka-darumar*. According to Thass, since Buddha attained nirvana (*bodi*) on the last day of the Tamil month *Markali*, (January 13), and since he was known as *sankarar*, the day came to be known as *sankaranti*.<sup>196</sup> In addition, he says that the day on which the Buddha’s attained nirvana was known as *bodi pongal* (as against the current usage Bohip pongal) because Buddha attained nirvana under the bodi tree (peepul tree) and was therefore also known as *bodi naatan* (virtuoso of nirvana) and *bodi vendan* (luminary of nirvana). Bodi pongal was thus a festival in honor the Buddha; and adds that this festival was also known as the festival of Indira (*Indira vila*), and enlightenment day (*deepa santi naal*), he says.<sup>197</sup>

Today, Pongal is widely known as farmers’ festival among the Tamils. Thass does not agree with this point of view and offers counter explanations. He notes that because the festival falls around one particular harvesting time (*nanjai*) of the year, it is related, but is not the actual reason why pongal is celebrated as *bodi pongal*. Furthermore, Thass argues that the religions of

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<sup>196</sup> *TT* December 11, 1907.

<sup>197</sup> *T* December 25, 1907.

immigrant outside-groups (*kudiyeriya paraaya saatiyaar*) were contrary to Buddhist ethics and festivals, and hence they devised the caste system so as to turn the followers of these festivals, such as the learned, kings, businessmen, and agriculturists, into upper and lower castes. They condemned those who lived by the principles of the Buddha's principles and who were descendants of the Sakya lineage of Veeravaku and Maavili (the Buddhist rulers of ancient times) as Parayars and lower castes. Despite such oppression, he says, the Buddhists have systematically continued the Buddhist festivals and practices. This is confirmed by the Velur-Mysore tunnel copper plates, he adds (but no further details are given).<sup>198</sup>

Other famous festivals such as *deepavalli* and *kartikai* (festivals of lights, as it is known today) also come under Thass's Buddhist recount. Currently, deepavalli or divali is celebrated across India every year in October or November. During this particular night many oil lamps (now many use candles as well) decorate the house, firecrackers are burst, new clothes are worn, and sweets and various other special dishes are prepared. The Hindu mythic explanation for the festival is that it is a celebration of the slaying of an *assuran* (demon) by a *devan* (god). Thass rejects such interpretations of Divali and offers a material explanation of the festival *deepavati* (not deepavalli or divali) instead. He says that the Buddhist monks were also great inventors and discoverers of things that benefitted the world. One of their great inventions was sesame (*ell*) oil (*ennei*), which they promoted among the people for its benefits of health. People were instructed by the king *Baguva* to apply it on their body before bathing in the river *Deepavati* in the Tamil territory of *Palli*, and to also use the oil in the preparation of foods that they consume in order to be in good health. Since many benefited by sesame oil, a particular day became a day of

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid.



recognition of the Buddhist monks who invented it. That is how it came to be known as *deepavati pandikai*, says Thass, by referring to the Tamil text *Peruntirattu* as evidence.<sup>199</sup>

Thass considers the myth making that the festival *deepavati* (divali) was to celebrate *devan*'s victory over an *assuran* as merely the product of outsiders' connivance to "sell religions" (*madakkadaikali parappi*) i.e., Hindu denominations in order to destabilizing Buddhism. He considered the additional rituals such as fasting and depositing the dishes made the day after the festival at the temple, and tying a red thread of prosperity blessed by them, to be nothing more than brahmin fabrications. According to Thass, the gullible fell for such pseudo-brahmin myths by not raising questions such as "who is *devan*; who is *assuran*; what is fasting and red-thread for; why don't the brahmins' wear the thread for their own prosperity." That is, in his views the *deepavati* festival has been distorted into divali or deepavalli.<sup>200</sup>

Likewise, for the festival of lights, known as *kartikai* in the Tamil region, Thass offers Buddhist explanations. In keeping with his explanations of *deepavati*, Thass says that *kartikai* is also a festival commemorating the Buddhist monks' invention of castor oil (in Tamil it is known as *vilakkennai*, the oil used for lamps) and its spread among the people to use at night. Since this oil, when used in lamps, was harmless to animals and humans, provided a bright light to ward off darkness, and was accessible to all, it was celebrated as *kartula* (*kar* means darkness, *tula* is removal), Thass explains. He mentions a Chinese traveler Saiyoyang [Huen Tsang] as a witness to this Buddhist contribution.<sup>201</sup> He held pseudo-brahmins responsible for spreading myths that undercut the original meanings behind such inventions and festivals of commemoration. By

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<sup>199</sup> T November 6, 1907.

<sup>200</sup> T November 13, 1907.

<sup>201</sup> T November 13, 1907.

rhetorically arguing that after the Buddhists invented household material, metal, mathematics and contributed great literary works there is none of its kind has been brought into being, especially after the pseudo-brahmins' ascendancy, Thass concludes that the brahmins have only contributed to "false-identities, false-myths, pseudo-religions, and pseudo-castes." Those who exposed these imposters, Thass concludes, have been debased as lower castes and Parayars, and their Buddhist principles and organizations have been decimated, which has only led to animosities and disunity among the people.<sup>202</sup>

Thass's discussion of Buddhist festivals and their eventual humiliation as Parayars are further portrayed in the writings on the lunar eclipse, which is popularly known as *ammavasi* among the Tamils today. Claiming that his conclusions are from the tablets and copper plates discovered in the villages Tiruvellam and Kulkhanpet in Vellore, Thass explains that around thousand two hundred years ago (around 700AD) one Buddhist ruler named Maavali, who lived in Maavalipuram (the present Mahabalipuram of the Pallavas), ruled with Buddhist compassion and died around the day of the lunar eclipse of the Tamil month *purattasi*. Recognizing his contribution, the people commemorated the lunar eclipse as *Maavali Ammavasi* and shared food with the poor. "However," Thass says, "those who live by begging through selling religions" having noticed the popularity of Maavali have meaninglessly changed *Maavali Ammavasi* into *Maaliya Ammavasi*. Moreover, they claimed that their god killed the Maavali, who was known for his compassionate living, in order to destroy his image and to make way for their begging.<sup>203</sup>

At another moment in the story of Maavali, Thass adds that Maavali belonged to the Paanar Buddhist lineage and his son named Tirupaanaalvaar, who was also a Buddhist, joined

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<sup>202</sup> T November 23, 1907.

<sup>203</sup> T October 16, 1907.

the Arangar or Alakar viyaram of Palli (the present Trichiraappalli in Tamil Nadu) after renouncing this worldly life in order to spread Buddhist teachings among people. Noting that Tirupaanaalvaar, like Maavali, met the same fate in the hands of the pseudo-brahmins, Thass indicates that not only were the Buddhist Viharas turned into temples (refers to Arangar or Alakar viyarm becoming Alakar Koil, a saivite Murugan Temple today) but, since the Buddhists who belonged to them were reduced as Parayars, Tirupaanaalvaar too became a Parayar and an “untouchable” follower of the brahmin god Vishnu, given his popularity among the people.

Thass’s apparently sweeping dismissals of the popular Hindu gods and festivals were attempts to cast doubt on the popular myths behind them. In fact, what Thass writes could be seen as plausible material explanations of why such practices go on, even though they are not historically substantiated as much as one would expect by modern standards of historical interpretations. On the other hand, such rereading sheds more light on the beliefs about Hindu gods and festivities as they are held and practiced today, and consider many different points of view. Given the purpose of Thass, i.e., to wean people away and mobilize them against popular Hindu notions, his alternative ways of understanding and interpreting them through Buddhism resonates well with readers of the *The Tamilan*. His prolific writings, thus, prod the *The Tamilan* reader to respond, as usual, which he publishes in every issue under the section “Correspondence.” Using such letters he further writes more on the Hindu appropriations of Buddhist practices. I consider some of these below.

### **Buddhist Criticism of Mythic Characters, Medievalists, and Orientalists**

A letter writer to the *The Tamilan*, Ve. Natarajar asks Thass to resolve the confusion between his view that Buddha was human like anybody else whereas the Hindu *Puranas*

(religious literatures) and other magazines claim that Buddha was an avatar of Vishnu and that Buddhism is actually a reworking of the Vedas. Welcoming this question as important for many, Thass says both views are a lie. Viewing the term avatar in the sense of metamorphosis, Thass asks how could the unseen character like Vishnu become a known and seen Buddha (*kaanaavuruvinindru kaanumuruvodru*). Since the view that there was a Vishnu is in itself a fabrication, and saying that such a fictitious character was the Buddha who attained nirvana amidst humans, are only the words of the ignorant and writings of the wicked, Thass clarifies. Instead, he says, the learned have pointed out that only from among men do *tevar* (spiritual beings) emerge, and not the other way around. Furthermore, Thass points out that the view that Buddha derived his principles from reworking the Vedas is a lie because it was only after and through him that the Vedas, Vedantam, Agamas, Shruti, and Tripitaka emerged. Therefore, he appeals to the Buddhists that they should only follow the literature that insist upon ethical living and honesty (*neetineri olukatilum vaaimaiyilum*), so that they can attain nirvana (*parinirvanamutru*) and turn into *tevarikal* i.e., spiritual beings, to live without sadness. However, Thass cautions that because the stories (*kataikal*) such as Vishnu are imaginations (*karpanaikal*) of those fake-gurus (*poikurukal*), who sell religions by spreading fear among people in order to amass wealth, and since those who buy them are those who would like to cleanse their wrongs by bribing their gods and religious-gurus, the Buddhists, who seek the truth, should avoid both.<sup>204</sup>

Another letter writer to *The Tamilan*, V. Tom, the Butler, of K G F, Champion Reefs asks for an explanations of why Arichandran [Harichandra] and Kali are deities that are supposed to guard the graveyard, while the *Vettiyaan* (graveyard worker) is supposed to appease them to let

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<sup>204</sup> *T* March 1, 1911.

the dead-body to move into the graveyard. At the outset, Thass calls the Arichandran story a fabrication, and therefore appeasing him to give way to the graveyard and Kali to open the gate to the heavens, through the grave-yard, are only additional myths. Rejecting these as lies, Thass says that such fabrications are meant to malign the original Buddhists as menial job doers and Parayars. For Thass, these are in line with myths such as that of Vishwamitra from whose breath, it is said, two Parayar women (*paraichikal*) and Veeravaku—the same name as that of the Buddha's predecessor—the man who guards the dead emerged. Thass explains that such myths are created to lend historicity to the upper caste opinion that the Parayars *qua* Parayars have been in existence since time immemorial, but only as glorified grave-diggers and as those who burn the dead bodies.

He bluntly stated those who believe and promote such stories are the ones who do not want to ask questions such as: if the grave-digger is capable of influencing the way to heaven and opening its gates as well what is the need for Vedas and Gurus? Furthermore, asking how is it that an Arichandran and a Kali are not at the Muslim graveyard, Christian graveyard, or for the caste-leaders' bodies (*saatittalaivar sudalaikkum*), but only for some groups, he insists that such practices exist only to re-inscribe the low status and ignorance (*pedamaiyai*) of the Parayars as grave-digging and body-burning communities.

Continuing his criticism that Kali is celebrated in Bengal for her ethical power, Thass asks sarcastically, as to why she would come to the South [South India] to open the graveyard gates. She would not, he concludes. Stating that whereas the Arichandran myth allows him to leave the graveyard to become the king again, Thass points out mockingly that the gravediggers on the other hand continue to be at the graveyard itself and have never seen the light of their life. Thus, he rejects not only the whole story of Arichandran as a lie, but asserts that the

interpretation that he continues to be at the graveyard forever is a double lie. Thass tells his reader instead that without bothering about Arichandran or Kali or even the gravediggers, they should go about burying the dead, as the dead would not know whether his or her leg is in the direction of east or west—Thass advocates the electric crematorium, instead of anybody manning the graveyard.<sup>205</sup>

Just as he rejected Vishnu, Arichandran, and Kali, Thass demystifies Dharma and Draupadi arguing that they are not gods, and nor do their stories in Baratam (Mahabaratam/Mahabarata) deserve to be celebrated. He discards the most celebrated god, Dharma, in Mahabaratam, since he indulged in violence to the level of killing his own brother Arjuna's son Aravaanan in order to retain his rulership. Furthermore, Thass finds the story about Dharma as undeservedly celebrated. Instead, Thass views Dharma as highly volatile person than being a role model as he is known to be. This is demonstrated, he says, in the religious myth about Dharma's anger. That Dharma had deep anger seeing his wife Draupadi (she was the bet in the game of dice and Dharma lost his wife in the game) being assaulted by the Kauravas. Thass says that since it is said in the myth that Dharma's anger, because he lost his wife to others, was so destructive that if somebody had dropped paddy on his red-hot face it would have become puffed rice only confirmed that he was not a peaceful person as expected of a godly character. For these reasons Thass says people who critically examine such mythic characters will never accept Dharma and his wife Draupadi as gods. On the contrary, using *Pinkali Nikandu* and *Manimekalai* Thass writes that only Buddha was known as Dharmarajan and Ambika Devi was known as Amman. He cites the presence of the peepul tree (*arasamaram*) and

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<sup>205</sup> T December 7, 1910.

neem tree (*vaepparam*) in Dharmarajan and Amman temples as evidence for their Buddhist prehistory.<sup>206</sup>

Ramayanam (Ramayana), the celebrated Hindu epic-mythology also comes under Thass's scrutiny. Joining A P Periasami Pulavar's (a regular contributor to *The Tamilan*) critical discourse on Ramayanam in *The Tamilan*, Thass says that it is a later development of Buddhist history, since the author of Ramayanam, Valmiki, writes about the monkey-disciple character of Ramar (Raam) talking about the Buddhist Viyarankal, and also because the guru of Ramar, Vashishtar, is portrayed with Buddhist symbolisms.

Thass's investigation of Ramayanam has the twin elements of revisionist reading and rationalist criticism. That is, he interprets Ramar, Sitai, and Lakshmanan as siblings (instead of the usual Sitai as Ramar's wife). In fact, Ramar, who is seen as having a Buddhist guru Vasishtar, and been trained in a Buddhist *viyaram*, is portrayed like any other ruler, without the sacred centrality that he assumes among the Hindus.

Stating that the portrayal of Sitai as the wife of Ramar, and Ramar as actually one of Vishnu's avatars and such stories could only be of recent making. Thass says that there was neither a ten-headed Ravanam in Lanka (Sri Lanka) nor was there a Rama who ruled Ayodhya. Instead, he argues that Valmiki's narrative of the ten-headed Ravana taking away Sita along with the earth, as well as Kambar, the celebrated medieval Tamil poet and the author of Tamil Ramayanam i.e., *Kamba Ramayanam*, stating that Ravanam dragged Sitai away, are only fabrications. Thass says that follies within their own narratives reveal their inconsistencies. For example, since both authors, i.e., Valmiki and Kambar, portray that Arichandran (Harichandra) was the only truth speaker, logically it meant that the rest of humans were all liars, which also

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<sup>206</sup> T December 14, 1910.

meant ironically that the authors of such stories were also liars. Therefore Thass says he does not hesitate to call them so. He concludes his analysis by asking the readers of *The Tamilar* to seriously ask themselves whether a man with ten-heads could have ever lived, and even if he had, would he have behaved like normal humans do? For, Thass says, that only such an investigation can help one to distinguish real (*maisaritiram*) from fabricated histories (*poisaritiram*).<sup>207</sup> as the source of his information, Thass is consistently aware of those celebrated medieval Tamil poets and writers' imbrication in stories and histories that privilege upper castes, and he does not spare them from his critical pen. If the Indian poets and writers had to face Thass's denouement, it is no wonder that the Orientalists too would not have escaped his critical investigation.

Titling another piece with a question, "whether *dhamma* (Buddhist Ethics) originated in the *upanishads*," Thass begins with an emphatic double denial "no, no" (*illai, illai*). Using "Buddhist Review," which was a quarterly published from London, he says that Max Muller and T H Rhys Davis who were responsible for writing that Buddhism had originated in the Upanishads had, due to their inadequate research (*tellara visaaranai saiyatakaalattil*), subsequently did an about face. However, while recognizing in their revised position that Buddhism pre-dated Hindu formations, Thass does not hesitate to admit that they were wrong in misreading Buddhism before. Instead of falling back on other Orientalists, as Philip Almond would say, Thass insists upon the Tamil Buddhist literature *Munkalai Tivakaram* as the source of his view that *aadivetam* (Vedas), and *upanidatam* (Upanishads) are identical to Buddha's enunciations.<sup>208</sup> Furthermore, instead of blindly believing in what one has written (*oruvaretuthi*

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<sup>207</sup> T November 16, 1910.

<sup>208</sup> For the British role in promoting Buddhism in South Asia see Philip Almond, *British Discovery of Buddhism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).



*vaitullatai vudane nambikkolluvatu alakandru*), Thass says it is important to examine a text, and its derivatives, so that one gets to know the language, the author, and the time of its composition. Only then can one attain the wisdom to share with others, he concludes.<sup>209</sup>

Thass's effort to write about his historical understandings of Buddhism did not stop with *The Tamilan*. He also mobilized people to identify themselves as Buddhists in their real life. It was not going to be easy, however, especially because of the entrenchment of upper castes in administrative positions and in controlling socio-cultural institutions, as well as the colonial government that did not concede substantive socio-economic changes in the lives of the poor (in Thass's sense), despite its gestures towards appearing to have the interests of the pro-marginalized at heart. However, Thass singlehandedly, through *The Tamilan* and various Buddhist associations that he founded and was part of, made a valiant attempt to rework the self-identification of the oppressed that would transcend caste. It is here that Thass's views on the census become relevant.

### **The Census and the Indian Buddhists**

Thass's Buddhist enunciations of the histories and ways of life of the marginalized, especially the Parayars, through the establishment of the Sakya Buddhist Associations, mobilizational lectures, and *The Tamilan* comes to a reckoning with the 1911 census. The events leading up to it demonstrated Thass's uncompromising standpoint against the upper castes and their campaign to label those they oppressed as Hindu lower castes by means of the census. While petitioning the British government to declare those communities who do not follow the upper caste ways of living, including their Hindu religious denominations, on the one hand, and

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<sup>209</sup> *T* February 8, 1911.

at the same time do not belong to Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Jainism, and other religions, on the other, as Buddhists, *The Tamilar* became the platform to exhort the marginalized to remain unflinching in declaring their collective identity as Buddhists. The 1911 census turned the then Madras Presidency into a battle ground between the marginalized and the upper castes and their officials in the British government who coaxed the former to declare themselves as lower caste Hindus, and as Parayars.

Writing about the 1911 census Thass readily welcomed its six questions to identify Hindus and non-Hindus: Does one worship Hindu gods and goddesses; if one does worship such deities whether one is permitted to enter temples; whether brahmins mingle in family events; or only others participate in such events; whether those who call themselves “clean castes” (*sutta saatikalenbor*) eat and drink with others who they deem as unclean; whether those who call themselves “clean castes” touch others who they deem as unclean. Thass justifies such questions, even though they have been codified by the colonial government, on the grounds that some Indians not only claim themselves to be higher Hindus in status but also displace and brutalize (*appurapaduti alangalittuvaruvatudan*) more than sixty million other Indians. Thass believed, therefore, that these questions and the census would begin the process of emancipating the oppressed from under the yoke of upper caste Hindus. Thass viewed the Hindu opposition to the classification of the marginalized as non-Hindu as a ploy to ruin the hopes that the latter may harbor of standing to from the British at the expense of high-caste Hindus. Thus he writes:

the prejudiced (i.e., the upper castes) are the ones who first not only refuse the Hindu status but intimidate people to declare themselves as Parayar caste when they go to the courts, the office of Registration of Deaths and Births, employment offices, and plague offices, even when they insist that they are caste-free. The Hindus are the ones who have insisted that the gods of the *paapaan* (an abusive expression for the brahmins) are different from the gods of *Parayans* (an abusive expression for the Parayars), that the Parayars should not enter their Hindu temples, and that the upper caste Hindus, following Manu, should bathe on coming into physical contact with the Parayars. The same Hindus

kept Parayar outside the Hindu fold, now distorting what was the case and claim that they had always considered the Parayar as Hindus, whereas it is the British who divided them as non-Hindus through the census.”

Here Thass points out that S. Srinivasa Raghava Aiyangar’s report which says that the oppressed will never see the light of day as long as they remain Hindus, and that therefore, they should either become Muslims or Christians. This, we saw in the introduction, as a frank observation of a ‘Hindu,’ who has witnessed what the ‘Hindu’ oppression does to its victims.<sup>210</sup> In fact Thass captures the incommensurability between the upper caste Hindus and the marginalized communities when he states that those Hindus who have accepted Nandan (the celebrated “untouchable Saivite”) as a god, even as they continue to view him as a Parayar, have done so only after killing him in the fire. As a corollary this also means that the upper castes will never worship the godly qualities of the rest of the six crore (sixty millions) who are alive i.e., the marginalized. Furthermore, the Hindus seek to scuttle the census efforts of the British government in order to push “the poor” back into ruin, as they had done in the past, he concludes.

What is Thass’s way out of this strategic hinduization of the oppressed on the part of the upper castes? By noting that even though the “caste-free Dravidians” have tried to move away from the ‘Hindus’ either as Muslims or as Christians or chosen to remain as “original Buddhists” they are still vilified as Parayars, Thass gives the clarion call to “all the poor” (*elaikal yaavarum*) that they should declare themselves “as Buddhists”—anticipating Ambedkar by forty-six

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<sup>210</sup> See Thass’s memorandum against Aiyangar, “An Argument Against Conversion” [sic], (written in English), which criticizes and rejects Aiyangar’s suggestion that the Parayars should leave Hinduism by converting to religions such as Islam and Christianity, is reproduced in Aloysius, *Iyotheethasar Sinthanaikal-II*, 3-8.

years.<sup>211</sup> Arguing that the poor may not have any scope for redemption, he appeals to the people to treat the census time as the time for registering and celebrating one's collective self-identity (*kulasirappu kaalamenakkaruti*).<sup>212</sup>

On December 14, 1910 Thass reports in English under the title "Buddhists and Census," "To the memorial submitted by Pandit C. Iyothee Thass General Secretary, Sakya Buddhist Society, Madras, the following reply had been received from the government of Madras. 'Buddhists will not be treated as Hindus. The number of Buddhists will be shown separately in the Imperial Tables' [sic]. The same is reported in Tamil as well below.

However, this success of the Buddhists with the British government brought about many challenges from colonial officials, the upper caste census officials, and ironically from the Christian missionaries such as C F Andrew (the notorious European missionary who declared the identity of the marginalized as Hindus, even when they convert to other religions such as Christianity, and Islam. He was a close associate of M. K. Gandhi. Needless to say, Thass calls reverend Andrew slimy (*vaalaipalathil oociyai nulaipavar*),<sup>213</sup> since Andrew's motives were to keep the marginalized as "lower caste Hindus" on records so that the upper castes would not trouble his project of recruiting the marginalized into Christianity "spiritually".

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<sup>211</sup> Given the resonance one is compelled to ask whether Ambedkar was also influenced by Thass? It is unclear, since there is no direct archival evidence to substantiate such a claim. However, Ambedkar's acknowledgment of Laxmi Narasu's, a fellow Buddhist of Thass, *Essence of Buddhism* and even writing a preface to its third edition in the 1940's tells that he was aware of this Buddhist movement in the Tamil areas. Ambedkar had also met with some of these Tamil Buddhists in Nepal who had gone to participate in the Congress of Religions in 1956 (Shanmugam, who lives in Hubli and a member of the present Hubli Buddhist Association (founded in 1924), was one of them).

<sup>212</sup> T November 30, 1910.

<sup>213</sup> T December 21, 1910.

As much as he attacked the missionaries' stake in retaining the Hindu category for the marginalized outwardly so that they can continue their converting business surreptitiously without offending the upper castes<sup>214</sup>, Thass did not hesitate to put colonial law into action when officials wavered on the demands of the Buddhists. In fact, he warned the Kolar Gold Fields Census superintendent "if caste is attached to the Buddhists [in KGF], then he will write to the Census head office to set it right."<sup>215</sup> It is at this moment that *The Tamilan* exhorted the marginalized to take the stakes inherent in their identity in public institutions seriously.

In order to embolden the oppressed to declare themselves as Buddhists, Thass published his message under the title "Indian Buddhists and the Census" that ran for many weeks. The write up begins with the salutation "good news for all Indian Buddhists," and goes on to mention that because the Buddhists in any nation (*ettesattilum*) do not have caste-codes (*saatiacharam*), that he petitioned the British to create separate columns for Buddhists and Hindus in the census. Now that it has been accepted, he says, the Buddhists in all those nations under the British administration should boldly declare themselves as Buddhists, regardless of whether they are in Mysore, Hyderabad, and Baroda under colonial rule.<sup>216</sup>

However, what comes thereafter in *The Tamilan* reveals more about the resistance of Indian officials to such anti-caste efforts. When people declared themselves to be Buddhists, if

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<sup>214</sup> Missionaries in general had a pejorative understanding of the marginalized communities such as Parayars not unlike the upper castes under colonialism. See Viswanath 2006 for more details. Today many Dalits retain caste certificates as "Hindu Scheduled Castes," while they are actually following Christianity or other religions. This is due to the prevailing Government of India policy of reservation, which says that only Hindu Dalits, neither Dalit Christians or Dalit Muslims, could avail the affirmative action programs.

<sup>215</sup> *T* January 25, 1911.

<sup>216</sup> By nation Thass refers to various linguistic groups in the Indian subcontinent true to his notion of nation associated with language and territory, as we saw early in this chapter.

the officials [Indian] refused to accept such a self-identification and persist in asking for their caste instead, Thass told them that they should say that they have been Buddhists since ages past and up to the present (*poorvamudal naaladuvaiyil*), and therefore, do not have castes. If they continue to persist and ask about the pre-Buddhist status, he wants them to assert that they have no right to ask such questions because they are none other than Indian Buddhists.

Stating the aforesaid message as the instruction from the Chennai Sakya Buddhist Association, Thass wanted the Buddhists to give up all caste surnames or appended names they may have such as “Pillai, Naidu, Mudali, and Chetti”, and also cease applying ash on their forehead or any symbols associated with marriage that may resemble that of Hindus.<sup>217</sup> Thass did not want them to declare themselves as “*swadesa* Buddhist,” but only as Indian Buddhist.<sup>218</sup> In fact, he publishes a model of the census sheet (*maatiri schedule*) that the readers of *The Tamilan* could use as a guide to declare their identity as Buddhists under column number four with respect to religion and Indian Buddhists under column eight pertaining to their lineage (*vamsam*), and to claim their primary profession to be agriculture and horticulture.<sup>219</sup> Thass’ efforts bear fruits when five hundred and thirty two people are registered as Indian Buddhists in Chennai (whereas it was seventy-six in 1901), and six hundred ninety three in some *jillahs*

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<sup>217</sup> *T* January 25, 1911. Note that such second names were not the monopoly of the upper castes. In fact, one is rather not sure whether many of the writers in *The Tamilan* were actually Parayars, given the fact that there were people of upper caste origins who rebelled against their caste legacies to join with the Tamil Buddhists.

<sup>218</sup> *T* February 8, 1911.

<sup>219</sup> *T* February 15, 1911.

(including Chennai) of Madras presidency.<sup>220</sup> In Mysore the Indian Buddhists numbered six hundred and three.<sup>221</sup>

Despite the fact that there were many millions of oppressed in South India, Thass's campaign in *The Tamilan* for Buddhism and Buddhist identity, and urging others joining him, he could only find a few hundred persons ready to declare themselves as Indian Buddhists. Even after discounting all the problems associated with the 1911 census, it still the Indian Buddhists end up in a meager statistic. Having said that it would be highly misleading, however, to hold up the census data as a reason to underestimate the Buddhist movement itself and the unprecedented questions it posed with regards to the problem of caste in India. Given the resistance from the British officials who were more receptive to upper caste power and the upper caste Indian officials' prejudices, as well as the domination of the public space by the Hindu Mahasabha/Indian National Congress, the marginalized daring to declare their identity against the grain, beyond what they did, could have only been possible at a great price in lives and livelihood. The very fact that some hundreds of people registered their identity as Buddhist despite such adversities is in itself commendable. This also means that, given the Buddhist movement's impact for well over a decade, the level of awareness among the people that they are Buddhists would have been really high, even if they could not get themselves to register so in the census because of all the intimidation they suffered as Thass tells us. It needs to be said, therefore, that there existed an anti-caste consciousness among women and men that would not have been possible but for the Buddhist movement of Thass and activists in the various Sakya

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<sup>220</sup> *T* September 20, 1911 and November 13, 1912.

<sup>221</sup> *T* November 13, 1912.

Buddhist Associations. Clearly, the Indian Buddhists' impact was more than we may fathom through the available census data alone.<sup>222</sup>

### **Heteroglossia of Tamil Buddhists<sup>223</sup>**

Thass's beliefs in Buddhism as the way of a caste-free life were put into public action in the form of establishing Sakya Buddhist Associations in various parts of Chennai since 1898. More branches came into existence in South India, Burma and South Africa. Each of these branches had a variety of members who not only practiced Buddhism but also wrote and spoke against the Hindus and their caste system that was at par with Thass, many times more incisive than Thass himself in their analysis. More importantly, these Buddhists wrote and spoke about their own history and identity individually and collectively ways that were never heard before in public life and various forums. That is, the Buddhist disavowal of caste categories and practices began to breach the caste capital of the privileged minorities such as brahmins, and, challenged their "propaganda of history" of India (to borrow W.E.B. Du Bois' term).<sup>224</sup> More importantly, it also sowed the seeds for collective emancipation against caste until then. It is imperative to examine some instances of the voices of Buddhist women and men, and their significance for anti-caste movement among the marginalized Tamils.

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<sup>222</sup> This is also true about the circulation of *The Tamilan*, since a copy was read out to others and shared by many.

<sup>223</sup> Here the term heteroglossia is used, in the Bakhtinian sense, to emphasize the coexistence of multiple anti-caste voices present within *The Tamilan*. For an alternative usages of the term to refer to the multilingual proficiencies of Indians and its destruction by "cultural processes of colonialism," and "civilizational distinction" among Indians and "distinction between leaders and people" respectively see Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas*, (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010), 134-35n and Bernard Bate, *Tamil Oratory*, 15-17

<sup>224</sup> Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*.



The letter written to *The Tamilan*, by S V Krishnamaal, a Buddhist woman was published in the first page under the title “Shri. Alarmelumangaiamman’s misinterpretations at the Brahma Samaj.” Taking on the lecture of a Hindu upper caste woman preacher named Alarmelu, who declared that the Buddha had extrapolated *dhamma* from Hinduism, Krishnamaal wrote that it was due to a lack of historical analysis and sense of time about the linguistic formations in India (*saritiravaaraichiyum molipetakaalankalum eetendru*) that the speaker said what she did. The speaker was a member of the Barhma Samaj, which also shows the sort of speakers and speeches that the Chennai branch of Brahma Samaj (which originated in the eighteenth century Bengal) propagated in the early twentieth century. Krishnamaal went on to make five counter arguments against the Brahma Samaj speaker. First, she said that the speaker was not aware that Hinduism never had a founder and hence there is no history about such a founder, unlike Buddha for Buddhism, Christ for Christianity, and Mohammed for Islam as they are known in world’s history. Second, she points out that the speaker did not know that the term Hinduism originated only in the times of, and through, Muslims in India. Since the speaker did not even know the origin, meaning, and history of the very term Hinduism, her claims about Buddhism originating from Hinduism is tantamount to saying that the Banyan tree grew from the fragile drumstick tree of yesterday, Krishnammal quips. Third, she asks the Brahma Samaj speaker if she had ever comes across the phrase “Hindu Vedas,” “Hindu Puranas,” and “Hindu Smiritis” in the ancient literature of either Sanskrit or Tamil. Obviously not. Fourth, she asks why a “brahma religion” branched off from Hinduism if it is as ancient and robust as it is claimed to be and why did an “aryan religion” —alluding to Brahma and Arya samaj— emerge from it. Suggesting that the speaker should at least hereafter learn more about Buddha *dhamma* Krishnamaal wrote, “it is because of her ignorance of the fact that the Buddha spoke about *dhamma* or Buddhism that the

speaker had said that Buddhism sprang from a founderless Hinduism, which thrives on one lie supporting the other.” Krishnamaal concludes the letter by telling the Brahma Samaj member, Alarmelumangaiamman, that is, if the latter could not find the literature to support her historical analysis she would volunteer to provide her, in *The Tamilan*, the references and historical evidence (*saastiravaadarattudan saritiravaarattudan*), to show that Hinduism, brahma religion, and arya religion have all originated from Buddha *dhamma*, and not the other way around.<sup>225</sup>

Here is a Buddhist woman writer in *The Tamilan* who is capable enough to take on the Brahmasamajists, who were, beginning with Ram Mohun Roy, predominantly upper caste men and women involved in constructing a Hinduism on a hierarchical order of caste. However, without having to refer to the caste problem of Hinduism, Krishnamaal was in a position to raise questions ingeniously about the mystery of Hinduism and what she calls the ignorance of its patrons. *The Tamilan* and the many voices therein could elicit the bold expressions of women such as Krishnamaal, whose critical interventions were no less than the contributions of Thass.

T N Anumantu writes under the title “Buddha’s Statue” (*shri buddhar silai*) about the presence of Buddha statues in the Tamil speaking areas, and the various meanings that they have come to assume. He says while visiting Salem city, he found, to the west of the London Mission School, a huge Banyan tree under which a Buddha statue, three feet wide and four feet tall. He says that as soon as he saw it he recited the *tiri-saranam* (Buddhist prayer). However, he adds, on enquiring about the statue, an old man said that it is a local deity “*talaivaangi muniandavan*” (head-seeking muni-god) that is invoked when goats and chickens are sacrificed and whenever cholera and plague strike the people. On hearing this, Anumantu says he asked the old man, why, if the deity was so good did people in the city suffer the plague in previous years. To this

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<sup>225</sup> T February 12, 1913.

question, the old man could only say only because in the olden days their forefathers lived well through the blessings of this deity that they continued to pay obeisance to this tradition. It is at this point Anumantu says that he began talking to the villagers, who had gathered by that time, about Buddha's history and his five principles of no lies, no stealing, no killing, no debauchery and no alcohol, and about the Aryan distortions thereafter. Moreover, he added, that there was no opposition from the villagers to his explanation. Furthermore, Anumantu stated that while leaving he asked the villagers how old the statue was, and they could only say that it has been there for generations. From this answer he concluded that this was, in fact, an answer to those who argue that Buddhism is of recent origin without adequate inquiry.

This story of Anumantu confirms the widespread presence of Buddha statues under Banyan trees in many Tamil villages, which usually go by the local deity name *Muniaandi*, *Muniaandavar*, *Munisamy*, and simply *Muni*. The villagers' acknowledgement that the statues had been there for many years goes to show that following the Buddha was a non-elitist tradition. Significantly, the fact that Anumantu's reconstructed discourse of the Buddha did not find any opposition from among the villagers only confirms their receptivity to alternative interpretations of the Buddha in this worldly terms, and that they were prepared to re-examine the superstitions that have come to embellish *muni*, the other name for Buddha in Tamil, as Thass pointed out earlier. Most importantly, Anumantu is able to turn a mundane and local experience to counter the claim that Buddhism was of recent origin, which was, for that matter, a British or an Orientalist invention.

There were readers of *The Tamilan* who were deeply troubled by the casteism of the upper castes and their arrogance and power expressed in their rhetoric of caste. They found inspiration in *The Tamilan* to re-read their past, not as lower castes but as Buddhists. J.

Aranganatham of Rangoon, Burma (now Myanmar) is one such reader who became a Buddhist and wrote down his reasons for doing so under the title “Why I became a Buddhist.” He writes that in his understanding of the caste system there is nothing high in the actions of those who call themselves upper castes, but only their thriving in the jobs of the British administration. In fact, he says,

“but for keeping their names as higher castes, they do not have high-wisdom, high-skills, high-actions, and high-character. Such people have the audacity to call the poor laborers, who are talented, able-bodied, and hard working as lower castes and Parayar and thus demonstrate their meanness.”

While he was puzzled by all these, Aranganatham says that only through *The Tamilan* and the books published by Thass he was he able to realize that the hatred of members of the upper castes for those they call lower castes was due to the fundamental difference in their respective religious ways of life. This was confirmed further, he maintained, by upper caste brutalities against those who enter the Siva and Vishnu temples and in their handing them over to the police, and by their campaign for the inclusion of the category Parayar in the British census of those who are denied the rights to talk about their religion but are referred to as brutes (*kaatumirandikal*). However, Aranganatham says that having witnessed all these he resolved that “only by re-embracing the path by which one was oppressed as a member of a lower caste one can regain one’s earlier status of castefreeness, and therefore become a Buddhist.” He writes of the three effects that becoming a Buddhist has had on him: first, by following the *panchsheelam* (i.e., no lies, no stealing, no killing, no alcohol, and no debauchery) he was able to lead a good and healthy life; second, by following the eight principles he aspired for a life that gained peace through *nirvana*; and third, ever since he realized that he was a Buddhist he gained the power to challenge and control the casteiests (*adakkumatikaaram*). Stating that these were his experience, he appealed to all those who had been oppressed like him to give up all

connection with Hindu denominations and their symbolisms, such as spreading sacred ash over their body. Aranganatham wanted them to look up to “their guru” i.e., the Buddha, instead.<sup>226</sup>

There were many other readers who read Buddhism as a counter to the “Aryan Manu Dharma” of dehumanization. For instance, C P Subramanyam of Anantapur (in Andhra Pradesh today) writes that in many of the “civilized” continents, Buddhism has taken roots primarily because it has advocated the avoidance of cruelties among humans, and appeals for ethical conduct. On the contrary, he indicts the “Aryan Manudharmaum” as meant for the destruction of the world, referring to the caste system and its pernicious effects on human society.

Subramanyam writes that Thass’s enunciation of Buddhism in his *aativedam* (his book on Buddhism) for the six crore (sixty millions) brutalized by caste, and by the willingness among people to embrace it, when juxtaposed with the writings in “Hinduism and fake-vedas” of the Rangoon Sakya Buddhist Association member Advaitanandam had helped to demystify the rapacity of Hinduism.<sup>227</sup>

That *The Tamilan* inspired many readers to propagate Buddhist ideas among them is also evidenced in a letter writer N. Parasuraman, no. 1304, ‘D’ Company, HQ, V.O.S & Miners of Bangalore, who says that he not only read the weekly from 1908 but also made sure he read them to many others since he did not want to keep the knowledge and awareness it generated within himself. However, he points out that while those who are discerning the significance of *The Tamilan* begin to see their life renewed. This is, he adds, unlike those who are clueless and skeptical about *The Tamilan*—since there were some readers of *The Tamilan* found its Tamil too literary and it urging them to embrace Buddhism too risky against the upper castes. Revealingly

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<sup>226</sup> *T* February 4, 1914.

<sup>227</sup> *T* May 21, 1913.

Parasuram said that he did not remain merely a Buddhist who had become one through its baptism i.e., taking *seelam*. Rather, he declared himself to be a Buddhist and succeeded in changing the records by petitioning a British official in order to register himself as a Buddhist, instead of the identity that had been ascribed to him (i.e., as a Parayar) by others.<sup>228</sup>

Some readers who took to Buddhism and believed in it as a social movement through Thass had to face challenges when they made efforts to mobilize others in to Buddhism. Without hesitation they wrote letters to *The Tamilan*, to Thass, asking for explanations. For instance, one Vee. Balasundiram writes that when he campaigned about Buddhism among those who indulged in alcohol and prostitution, he faced a dilemma when they not only rejected it by saying that the Buddhists follow a man i.e., Buddha, whereas they follow gods and goddesses, and yet continued in their habits. In his reply Thass says that it is pointless to waste one's time with alcoholics and debauchers. However, he attempts to answer Balasundiram that it is better to follow a man whose words and actions helped human society to save itself from self destructive actions than to utter the word god while indulging in lies, stealing, killing, drinking, and prostitution. Thass connects such practices with the Hindu dogma itself, that is, the Hindu gods indulging in debauchery, killing, drinking, stealing, and lies that are glorified and therefore, he explains, that their believers continue what their gods had wrought. Furthermore, Thass adds, that the humane Buddhists were brutally annihilated in order to establish such religions. Nonetheless, he concludes in his answer to Balasundiram by saying that if these religionists continue such brutalities in the present times, the Muslims and Christians will pack and drop

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<sup>228</sup> T December 3, 1913.

them between the Balkans and Turkey (perhaps a reference to the possibility that the Christians and Muslims could overpower the caste Hindus.)<sup>229</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter examined the interventions that Thass made to shift the focus onto the roots of the problem of caste—that caste was not a functionalist relation between the upper and lower castes of Indian society in a non-controvertible mould, transcending time and space. Rather he interprets casteism/brahminism and the resulting discrimination not as just rivalry between one caste over the other, but between those who have caste and those who do not, between those who operate from within the caste system and those who are against it from without. Apart from opposing the upper caste (as we saw in the first chapter), Thass makes a rereading of the past from the viewpoint of those who were marginalized as belonging to lower castes. Effectively Thass portrays the practice of Buddhism as the reason why they were marginalized as people of lower castes, particularly as Parayars, and not due to their civilizational insufficiencies vis-à-vis the upper castes.

In so doing, he employs multiple tools. A universal non-caste identity, as opposed to segmentation of castes in hierarchy, is one. The Indian sub-continent and the Tamil speaking areas are interpreted and seen as having a Buddhist prehistory of multilingual non-caste people. The upper caste goddesses and gods and festivals are expounded as Buddhist in origin but appropriated into Hindu formations later for the establishment of caste power, especially of the brahmins. Thass makes the case for ethical rationalist practices that are incommensurable with brahminical cultural elements as the hallmark of those Buddhists. It is precisely due to this

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<sup>229</sup> *T* October 15, 1913.

incommensurability that people were marginalized as lower castes, particularly as Parayars, in Thass's view. If caste was anathema to Buddhism, then the Buddhist colleagues showing any internalization of caste categories blindly was not acceptable to Thass. Thass's beliefs were matched by his actions temporally to actualize the changes in the conditions of the marginalized such as rejecting the upper caste imposed caste categories, especially that of Parayars. This is corroborated in the events leading up to the Indian Census of 1911, in which the marginalized were able to assert their public identity as Buddhists, in order to become anonymous in caste terms and leave it behind them as the exclusive but shameful status of the privileged castes. Thass's Buddhist beliefs that animate the reinterpretation of the past of the marginalized also influenced his actions for their present and future, in the ways they represent themselves, and make their claims vis-à-vis the upper castes and the colonial state.

On the other hand, Thass's criticism of trying to redeem a positive notion of being a brahmin, trying to see Buddhist meanings in Saivite and Vaishnavite symbolisms, rhetorically still points to the difficulties of his project of reconstruction through the deconstruction of Hinduism. Nevertheless, the Buddhists' oppositional and reconstructive discourses come to a fruition more firmly in the socio-economic claims that they make. The next chapter will investigate the various components of the representational discourse of Thass and the Tamil Buddhists.



### Chapter Three

#### Representation of the Self: Staking Claims through Political, Economic, and Cultural Institutions

The experience of caste oppression produced self-empowering initiatives among the marginalized communities in South India. The transformations that the latter wanted and achieved in public and private realms, were mediated by their own representativeness instead of their meek acceptance of what was dispensed either by upper castes or by the colonial government. As we have seen thus far, Pandit C. Iyothee Thass was at the forefront of articulating and actualizing such kind of self-empowerment. However, he was not alone in this upsurge of consciousness among the marginalized. Both from within the Tamil-speaking region and from the diaspora of Tamil Buddhists, Thass could mobilize people and funds that would produce a plethora of political, economic, and cultural initiatives.<sup>230</sup> These initiatives not only demystify the upper caste and colonial presumptions about the lower castes and conventional

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<sup>230</sup> The term diaspora here refers to those Parayars who have been either displaced and dispersed abroad by the British colonial plantation policies against their wishes, at least at the outset, or to those who migrated as indentured laborers and became free laborers and citizens abroad (including South Africa and West Indies) out of their own volition. This phenomenon of the marginalized becoming diaspora is connected with their movement of migration. That is, the Parayar laborers migrating from Tamil-speaking regions to the northern districts of the then Madras Presidency, particularly to Hubli Railway Junction and Kolar Gold Fields of the present day Karnataka, as a way out of their caste based economic hardships in the nineteenth century. It is important to stress here that the diaspora Tamil Parayars were also transnationals in the sense that some of them moved between various British plantation colonies such as Trinidad and Tobago, Malaysia, South Africa, and so on even as some of them moved back and forth between India and the various British plantation colonies. For the critical role of Indian diaspora in the attainment of land ownership among the indentured and slave laborers see Eric Eustace Williams, *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago*, (New York: Praeger, 1964), 102-121.

understandings of the marginalized on the one hand, but also emphasize the entitlements of laboring and anti-caste<sup>231</sup> communities, on the other.

Following the first chapter on oppositional standpoints of the marginalized, and the second chapter on reconstructional invocations of their being Buddhists, this chapter will analyze the representational claims of anti-caste communities in its various forms. In fact, the lower castes not only undercut Congress and Swadesi movements as formed through upper caste initiatives, but also make efforts for their own emancipation from caste practices in India. However, the narratives of representation of the marginalized elude a neat compartmentalization into political, economic, cultural, and identity aspirations and assertions. Even though a particular demand for transforming their social conditions at a particular time becomes a singular focus, it is interwoven into the various struggles that they wage concurrently.

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<sup>231</sup> Those who were marginalized as lower castes and had also been identified by the upper castes in various terms of indignities such as Parayars, Sakiliyars, Pallars, and Sanars are collectively seen here as anti-caste communities. They are against upper-castes' caricaturing them in caste terms in general as we are seeing in this study. Some of these communities could have been helpless in acceding to such divisions or caste names as their identity only under the duress of the colonial caste power. This is clear since these caste categories of the marginalized remained demeaning markers, unlike the privileged groups making capital out of their caste and caste names. Arguably a Parayar is neither willing to celebrate his or her caste nor a Parayar is accorded a level playing field by upper castes to stake any historical claims as a caste at par. The exception to this view is Rettamalai Srinivasan (1806-1945), the publisher of the quarterly *parayan* (1893-1900) (all the issues are unavailable now), mobilizing the Parayars to challenge the privileged caste groups by reclaiming their identity as Parayars, instead of as Hindus or Buddhists (which produced some discard among those who saw themselves as Buddhists historically then). And some Parayars keeping Parayar as their second name in the present Tamil Nadu. Nevertheless, even in such efforts it was more to counter-assert their difference with brahmins and other upper castes and to make a negative category work positive, which could not come forth as anticipated. See V. Revati, *Tamilakattin Dalit Arasiyal Munnodikal*, (Pondicherry: Navajoti, 1997), 41-61.

### The Public Petition 1891

Given the talks about organizing the next Indian National Congress meeting in Chennai, Thass warns about the violence among the members as it was in the Surat meeting of the Congress in 1907. Pointing to the Congress pretensions of being a national outfit, he says one needs to understand what a “real nation” (*yatarata nation*) is and what it is not.<sup>232</sup> This cannily leads to Thass’s forthright review of the functioning of the Congress until then through his publishing in *The Tamilan* of his own archive of public petitioning seventeen years earlier in 1891. Clearly, it offers a complex interpolation of identity, economic, and educational issues of those oppressed as untouchables that interrogate the representative credentials of “the national Congress.”

Titling his piece “The State of Affairs in the Congress Committee,” Thass says that trusting and welcoming their goal of representing the demands of Indians to the British without discrimination in the name of caste and religion “the casteless Dravidians” meeting in Nilgiris sent a “public petition” on December 21, 1891. Interestingly, before he subtitles his ten demands, Thass has an introduction in the petition, which is a short narrative on the caste system, and on the non-caste etymological investigation of the Tamil terms such as *saati* (a verb for perform or a noun for section), *paraiyar* (as those who speak and perform percussion instruments), *melsaatiyor* (people with noble actions), and *tiyasaatiyor* (people with destructive actions) that have come to bear caste meanings. Thass concludes, thus, anybody and everybody could be called a Parayar or Paraiyar and the term does not have any validity in the sense of

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<sup>232</sup> *T* October 7, 1908.

referring to someone as untouchable or lower caste—some aspects of which we saw in the first chapter.<sup>233</sup>

What are Thass's demands? True to his preface in the memo, the very first demand is to expunge all references to the derogatory category Parayars. Three reasons are stated to substantiate this demand: first, that there is no linguistic or any other basis at all for the very usage of this category. Second, that a person with no learning, and behaving like an animal (*mirugacheyalukku oppaana*) calling somebody well mannered, educated, and with wealth a *parayan* (*pariah*) is a contradiction. Third, that the epithet *parayan* is used wantonly to destroy somebody psychologically and ruin his life (*manamkundri naanamadaintu seerkettuppokiraan*). Therefore, Thass says that this category *parayan* should be declared as contemptuous and the law should punish a person using it.<sup>234</sup> The second demand is about the establishment of many schools for those who have been marginalized as Parayars. Significantly, Thass demands that the teachers in these schools should be appointed from within this community and that the students' fees should be reduced into half. The third demand is for establishing three scholarships for those who have passed matriculation from this community. The fourth demand is that every educated person from this community should be employed in every office in the Madras presidency.

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<sup>233</sup> T October 14, 1908 Note Thass's etymological examination and explications are in concise form, since they are part of a public petition, as a preface to stake many demands below. Nevertheless, at various moments in *The Tamilar* these points are clarified further to the readers. See Chapter One pp.46-49

<sup>234</sup> Today the term is banned through laws against its usage in public in Tamil Nadu state laws. However, it is still used by upper castes to commit atrocities. This is similar to the African Americans' situation in the US, who continue to suffer the usage *nigger* and other violence at the hands of racists of all kinds, including from Indian immigrants who themselves, sometimes, are victims of white racists. For instance, some Tamil speaking Indians in the US call the African Americans *karuppankal* (dark skinned fellows) derogatorily, even though many of them are dark themselves.

The fifth demand insists that no job should be barred for anyone in this community with required education and good conduct.

The sixth demand says that in all districts and *jillahs* (divisions) a person appointed by this community should be given the charge of addressing the problems of this community in municipal and village associations.

The seventh demand insists that the rule 461 of the jail court be expunged, since it compels people from this community to do menial jobs in jailhouses.

The eighth demand is that all public wells and ponds be open to this community without any obstruction [caste based].

The ninth demand says that the practice of not allowing the people from this community to enter or sit in offices manned by the 'Hindus,' [upper castes] should be stopped. Instead, they should not only be welcomed into the offices but their issues need to be resolved at once.

The final and tenth demand is that in villages which have a majority of people from this community, a responsible person from among them should be appointed in the posts of *maniakkaran* (surveyor) and *municif* (local judge). Moreover, when the [British] collector visits villages, these representatives from this community should be directly consulted i.e., not mediated by the upper caste officials, to deliver justice.

Reminiscing his petition, Thass says that the secretary of the Congress Committee in Chennai, M. Veeraragavachariyar, acknowledged the petition then and said he would inform about the developments. However, he points out that it has been seventeen years since he sent the petition and the acknowledgement from the Congress, but they had not done anything about the oppressed community's demands.

Considering the time of the petition, 1891, Thass's demands represent a deep understanding of the conditions of the marginalized as well as their strengths to overcome the impediments of caste. Despite the fact that the category *pariah* or *parayan* was derogatory it was in circulation not surprisingly among the upper caste officials working with the British, but even among the missionaries and colonial officials who talked about the impact of caste on them ironically.<sup>235</sup> Clearly, Thass exposes this as Others' imposition, rather than self-actualization of one's identity. Even though he did not state how they saw their identity (the trajectory of it we saw in the previous chapter) in the petition then, he was firmly opposed to the category Parayar as a marker of contempt. Any utterance or reference to it as *the* identity of a *lower caste* community, beyond the heuristic signification of oppression, is anathema to him. Going by the readers' response in *The Tamilan*, this view was widely present. Thus, Thass's demand to remove the term *pariah* or *parayan* from parlance, with the force of law, was aimed at the Indians and colonialists alike, and for that reason it could be asserted as the first ever written effort in India.

Moreover, contrary to the pejorative imagination about the Parayars he makes a complex and dignified portrayal about them as educated, well-mannered, and wealthy as well, even as he writes profusely about their impoverishment under the caste system. This is seen in the demands that talk about the necessity of appointing teachers from "within." This means two things: that others with caste-feelings do not deserve to be teachers, not least for those they marginalize as

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<sup>235</sup> Recently two dissertations that were defended at Columbia University, bearing the term *pariah*, clearly demonstrate how this category was codifying in colonial and upper caste sense. On the other hand, one is rather surprised by the lack of any study in the recent past on upper castes, particularly the brahmins, problematizing their history, economy, culture, and power. Here it is important to note that the critical studies of Thass and Ambedkar, such as "Who are Untouchables?" (which reject marginalizing categories, such as Parayars and Mahar), did not hesitate to unveil the power of the privileged groups to define others in demeaning caste terms.

lower castes; and that despite the indignities that are thrust on the *pariah* they are educated and capable enough to see their wards through to any job, provided the necessary support (fees and financial) are made available like the upper castes have come to acquire. That's why Thass's demands, such as, scholarships for the matriculates and beyond, and that "no job" should be barred for the marginalized, exemplify the confidence of such communities under oppression, a matter about which we know very little still.

The 1891 petition also shows how Thass pointedly rejected the upper castes as unworthy of becoming representatives for all Indians because of their casteism, through practices such as even not allowing those they call lower castes enter into their offices, let alone letting them sit in them. No wonder, then, he distrusts their occupying the village and district jobs; instead he shows that the representatives of the Parayars are prepared to deal with the colonialists themselves.

Thass's writing about the wealthy and educated among the Parayars may point to his class bias among those who are subjugated to caste. However, such a view is valid had he stood only for the cause of the elites among the marginalized. On the contrary, Thass's understanding of and standing for Buddhism, negotiations with the British, and throwing the gauntlet against the upper castes insist that he was for the collective emancipation of the marginalized beyond entertaining class and other sectarian tendencies. This is substantiated by his writings regarding the conditions and demands of the underclass in India, which we will see in details below.

### **Brahmin Industrial Fund [sic]**

Thass's anti-caste scrutiny of the Congress and its failings to represent the needs of the marginalized leads to his investigation of many other organizations that had the prefix "national." Titling his piece "Chennai National Industrial Fund's Deepavalli Collection and Casteless Dravida Mahajana Sabha [association]" Thass says that the Fund's letters of request to the Sabha to promote [technical and other] vocations among people were discussed in detail and the following decisions were arrived at: that the Fund has among its office bearers fourteen brahmins, one Chettiyar, one Mudaliayar, one Muslim, and three Naidus. Thass writes, therefore, there is predominance of the brahmins already, and once the Chettiyar, Mudaliyar, Muslim, and Naidus retire, then, even though it is called National Industrial Fund it will actually become "Brahmin Industrial Fund" (BIF). Once it becomes BIF, then, Thass asks, what is the point in other sections contributing to the fund if it does not benefit all, but functions only for the welfare of the brahmins through their dominance in it.

On the contrary, Thass writes that the Sabha members say that only if the Fund makes the following changes among its office bearers that the casteless Dravidians will support it. First, once an organization calls itself "national" it ought to be so genuinely in all its structures, instead of being an exclusionary domain of the brahmins. Thass, therefore, wants the president-committee to comprise of just one brahmin, an Euro-Asian [Anglo-Indian], and a Muslim. The secretaries should comprise of again just one brahmin, a non-brahmin, and a Muslim. Whereas the directors' board should have four brahmins, four Euro-Asians, four non-brahmins, four Muslims, and "four non-caste Dravidians." Second, four children from each of these groups present in the association should be given the financial support for vocational education and jobs



without any discrimination (*pedamaiillamal*). Third, only when such changes and assurances are made that the Dravida Mahajana Sabha<sup>236</sup> will mobilize the funds.

Furthermore, the letter also mentions that the Sabha has come up with these conditions only because the National Industrial Fund does not appear to practice caste when collecting funds, whereas it practices caste when spending the fund, when providing vocational education and placement in jobs. Firmly, therefore, the letter says that only with the implementation of the suggested changes would the Sabha join the Fund efforts, and the Sabha regrets that such a non-discriminating genuine public association does not exist in India so far. Thass concludes this writeup about the Dravida Mahajana Sabha's position on the National Industrial Fund saying "it has been a week since its letter was sent and there is no reply yet, but will soon be clear whether it is truly a National Fund and Industrial Association or something else."<sup>237</sup>

Thass's criticism of whatever was floated as *national* as nothing but a masquerade for brahminical predominance did not remain as mere criticism without attempts to correcting such associations of upper caste hegemony. Even though his solutions to the problem of brahminism was primarily to rebuild a casteless collective community, he was clear about the necessity of addressing equal representation of various caste and religious groups that were there as a first step towards integration. It is in this light that we need to see Thass's lament about a "genuine public association" not functioning in India then that would incorporate all the groups existing without discrimination. His inclusionary methods aimed not only to displace the exclusionary privileges of the brahmins and limit them as minority, true to their minimal presence among the

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<sup>236</sup> Thass established Dravida Mahajana Sabha in 1891 in order to campaign against the upper castes and census report classifying the marginalized as 'Hindus.' See Ravikumar, *Iyothee Thass and the Politics of Naming*. <http://www.countercurrents.org/dalit-ravikumar280905.htm> (last accessed on 12/5/2010) and "Varalatrai Nerseithal," *Num Vaerkal (vidai 2036)*, 2 (2005), 21-25

<sup>237</sup> *T* October 21, 1908.

Indians, but also to make sure that the oppressed communities were also entitled to resources and facilities at par with other groups. This entitlement of the oppressed was not to depend on the patronage of the privileged, nor through making the upper caste imposed caste identities as the basis; rather, it had to come through the marginalized own terms of representation. Hence, Thass's attack on the brahmins' preponderance does not translate into reposing trust even on those upper castes who were not brahmins. That is why Thass insists on independent representation for "non-caste Dravidians" i.e., the most marginalized, i.e., the Parayars and others, both as office bearers as well as beneficiaries in the form of their next generation children's education, even as he advocates the equal membership to "non-brahmins," Euro-Asians, and Muslims. It is clear that the Sabha not receiving any reply in 1908 from the Fund, as it was with the Congress regarding his 1891 petition, only reaffirms Thass' view that the "national" was tantamount to "brahminical" and continued to remain so in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century then.

However, Thass's recognition of "non-brahmin" as a category is not elaborated in his writing. The ambiguities of Thass using the category non-brahmin are vitiated for the following reasons: a) It is not clear whether it is inclusive of both the upper castes and lower castes among the non-brahmins. b) Since Thass is advocating the category "non-caste Dravidians" for the Parayars and other most marginalized of caste to point out that they reject caste imputation, as a corollary this would also mean that the category "non-brahmin" is still implicated in caste, and the groups among them are not or yet to become caste-free. Nevertheless, Thass finds merit in

some non-brahmin members and groups potential in the struggle against brahmins and their joining forces with the Parayars in the anti-caste movement in South India.<sup>238</sup>

The realization that the National Industrial Fund was pro-brahmin and anti-marginalized and that the suggestions for revamping the politico-economic representative power of various other groups fell onto deaf ears, results in Thass and his contemporaries advocating independent organizations for their economic advancement. This is evident in the emergence of the Non-Caste Dravidian Industrials Limited, aspirations for a bank of the poor, advocacy of Indentured labor rights against the Congress, and land to the tiller movement, and Panchama educational foundation. These will be examined in the following sections in detail.

### **The Non-caste Dravidian Industrials Limited**

On June 10, 1908, *The Tamilar* made its only *supplement* issue that had an extra fifth and sixth pages. This was to publish the efforts for what was later named as “The Non-Caste Dravidian Industrials Limited” (TNDIL) through the collaboration between expatriate and the marginalized Tamils by mobilizing their own funds. The primary goal of this organization was to spread education and vocational training among the children of those oppressed as lower castes, such as Parayars. However, they did this by identifying themselves as “Pandiarkal” i.e., “ancient and indigenous communities” and “Dravidians,” and not as Parayars and Panchamars.

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<sup>238</sup> This is evident in Thass’s support for the candidacy of Justice Sankara Nair for the Madras Executive Council that his appointment would benefit all linguistic and religious communities such as Muslims. On the contrary, Thass rejects V. Krishnasami Iyer’s candidacy by stating that he represents brahminical interests and that with his assuming office caste discrimination of others and the “stench” of caste and religion i.e., the power of the brahmins, “will” spread further in the Madras presidency. In fact, Thass goes on to say that if justice Sankara Nair could not be appointed, i.e., if a non-brahmin could not be appointed, then, instead of a brahmin, a British should be appointed for the post. *T* January 10, 1912.

The supplement is actually a letter written by a Tamil expatriate in Australia who signs off as “An Australian.” He titles the letter “Oh Ancient Indigenous Tamils Pay Little Attention!” (*Tirutamilpaandiyarkaal satrunokanmin*). As if to clear the meaning of his title, his salutation to the readers of *The Tamilan* serves more or less a glossary. That is, he clarifies that *paandiyarkaal* means “this nation’s ancient communities,” and the prefix before it i.e., *tirutamil*, means “those who belong to the classical Tamil language,” whose attention he seeks with an exclamation mark. The very first sentence, after the salutation, says that when examining whether those who are called Parayar and Panchamar presently are the names given by others or by themselves, it is clear that the recent immigrants (*vanderum paraayarkal*) have only reduced the Buddhist gurus of indigenous communities (*poorvakudikalukku*) and those who supported them as Parayars. He quotes a passage from the Tamil literature *nanaveti*, which says how the ignorant have reduced the followers of Buddha (*sotinatan*) as Parayar and untouchables (*teenkanamaantarendru tallinaarkal*). Likewise the Australian mentions other Tamil literatures<sup>239</sup> to substantiate that the Buddhist monasteries and literatures were destroyed along with the kingdoms and more importantly families and the learned were reduced as Parayars. He says that going by the historical and literary evidences, therefore, one can firmly say that the name *parayan* could only have originated in the last six or seven hundred years, and not before. It is also proved by the recent invention (through the Indians) of the category *parayan* in the census, he insists. Having said this, the Australian warns that those who are oppressed as Parayars should not only not accept such a categorization, but that they should also secure themselves while the British are around.

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<sup>239</sup> Such as *naaraatiyappurana sangaittelivu*, *avirovuntiyar sootiravurai* and *tiruvasakam*.

On his part, Thass writes in the supplement that the Australian is from Chennai Peddunaikanpettai, who emigrated to Australia thirty-three years ago, i.e., around 1875, and has prospered as a businessman. Though the name of the Australian is not revealed, Thass says that since he is deeply involved in Buddhist thought and investigation and realized the oppression on the indigenous Buddhists through the outsiders, he asked for the methods of transforming their conditions. Reflecting on this, Thass says that since knowledge and wealth would only make one man treat another with respect, he recommended to the Australian that mobilizing funds for free education till matriculation and thereafter for free vocational training as a necessity.<sup>240</sup>

The Australian, expressing concurrence with Thass, writes back (which is also published in the same supplement) that he is willing to invest a large amount of money (*peruntokai*) through which boys and girls could go to Chennai from all the twenty-one *jillah* of Madras Presidency in order to get residential education and vocational training. Probably sensing that he may be seen as just another generous benefactor, the Australian says that him sending big money or Thass establishing educational and vocational institutes are not big things, but that he wants such initiatives to be sustained, instead of being lost to the “outsiders” (*paraayarkal*) (he means the brahmins here, of course) after their times.

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<sup>240</sup> This echoes Booker T Washington’s self-help initiative *Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute* in 1881 for the African Americans in the US. Studies show that Washington conceived this project due to the untrustworthiness of the American Government then, on the one hand, and white racism, on the other. In fact, more than the Tuskegee, Marcus Garvey’s Negro Factories Corporation with its variety of business interests could be compared with The Non Caste Dravidian Industrials Limited. However, the Negro Factories Corporation’s capitalistic concerns are far different from the Non Caste Dravidian Industrials Limited’s combined efforts of self-help, Governmental actions, and protest based rights. Such comparisons between African Americans and the Dalits in India are still understudied. See E. David Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association*, (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1981).

Furthermore, the Australian says that among the Tamil communities, i.e., the Parayars and other marginalized, some have become Christians, some have become Muslims, while the others are trapped in the outsiders' [brahminical] religious caste structure. Mentioning that the Christians and Muslims somehow manage to live a dignified life, the Australian emphasizes that his educational and vocational institutes are aimed at those who are still languishing in the "brahminical caste-structure" (*piramanarenbor saatikattukkul*).

However, the Australian invites others as well to be partners in this venture. Therefore, he writes that those who want to be advisory members should donate rupees hundred, while those who want to be just supporters of this project could donate from one to ten rupees and register their names as members in "Tirutamil Paandiyar Educational and Vocational Industry" and accept receipts from *Ka. Iyothethaasar* (Iyothee Thass). Once considerable members join, he says, he would send his large share of money through the government as well as visit the other members, and signs off, as before, "An Australian."

Thass leaves "an important note" at the end of the Australian's letter that he welcomes those who are interested in this project to send their names, addresses and their donation as well as their ideas for the institutions. He also leaves a footnote to clarify that "Tamil Paandiar," "Poorva Dravidar," and "Dravida Paandiar" are all terms that refer to the same, i.e., to those who are currently oppressed as Parayars, but originally Tamil Buddhists.<sup>241</sup>

Examining *The Tamilan* supplement serves as a template to understand the multiple dimensions of representational discursive of the marginalized embedded in it. First of all, those who were brutalized in the name of caste, such as Parayars, were not simply depending on petitioning the government as the only mode of their survival. Demystifying the common view

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<sup>241</sup> *T* June 10, 1908.

among the upper castes, then and now, that those they stigmatize as lower castes were just communities who could not survive on their own, *the supplement* reveals the following on the contrary:

That the marginalized castes did not only move as indentured labor, but also as expatriates to other countries, such as Australia, as early as 1875.<sup>242</sup> Given the fact that they could rise up abroad financially and in status, despite moving away from one's own place of birth and losing the support of one's own society, could have been a far cry from the oppression of caste and stigmatization of the upper castes.

Significantly, the marginalized expatriates could radicalize their anti-caste feelings in two ways mostly, since this was more plausible in the theaters of migration and immigration:

One, that they were able to give up any vestiges of caste obeisance as well as articulate their self-identity through reconstructing their past and representing it in their own terms. This is what one sees when "the Australian" opens his letter addressing his readers (knowing full well that most of them are from the marginalized communities, including Parayars) as actually ancient Tamil communities by virtue of linguistically belonging to the legacy of classical Tamil but were now consigned as Parayars and untouchables because of their Buddhism and due to outside agents of caste, i.e., the brahmins. Thus, the Australian reiterates (what Thass and others have been doing for long) through his own literary evidences and interpretations that the oppressed of caste, the Parayars, are none other than Tamil Buddhists.

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<sup>242</sup> The implications of Parayars and other marginalized communities practicing various professions such as butlers, businessmen, skilled-artisans (as carpenters, masons, cottage manufacturers, and so on) as well as the indentured labor skills remain largely unexplored themes. Their presence, differences, and integration among the Indian diaspora and with people of non-Indian origin are also worthy of serious studies.

Second, that the expatriates were in a position to repatriate money that could not have been possible to mobilize in their own place of origin in order to initiate educational projects of their own vision and design. However, the contributions from abroad are to be combined with the generation of funds from among the locals whether it is one rupee or hundred and the locals would also serve as the advisors and guardians of such projects with more responsibility and commitment.

Though the TNDIL membership rises to sixty-four, however, unlike its contemporary Tuskegee Institute of Booker T Washington in the US, it could not become a reality in the way it was imagined by Thass and the Australian. One does not know its influence thereafter in the making of schools for the marginalized through their own efforts. Nevertheless, the very idea of the TNDIL, was to serve as a counter to National Industrial Fund that was serving the brahmins and other upper castes then, even though it was supposed to serve all communities, since various communities made fund contributions. Had TNDIL come into existence it could have been yet another brainchild of the marginalized ingenuity in design and purpose.

However, it also needs to be said that the failure of TNDIL to come into being is also symptomatic of the limitations of the marginalized to counter the hegemony of the upper castes by private initiatives, then and now. Although the privileged groups could have had many material advantages in pre-colonial times, their preponderance in the colonial apparatus became the central factor by which they could compete with colonial power at par in order to saturate their interests during colonialism. And, thus, the upper castes, especially the brahmins, could hegemonize the control of resources, such as land and finance, as well as the emerging modern industries by becoming the key component of the colonial state and governmentality, as Thass



points out in many occasions.<sup>243</sup> On the contrary, the communities such as Parayars having been marginalized by both the colonial and caste power could not actualize their plans to prosper either through the state or through mobilizing the meager resources that they were in possession of. In fact, the oppressed castes' repatriated money from abroad though was of considerable amount (as it is shown in the next section), yet it could neither have been sufficient nor the colonial and caste power would have allowed such projects to emerge to topple the preponderance of the privileged. Thus, the TNDIL then—or the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Dicci) today<sup>244</sup>—could only have been marginally successful, if they had taken off against the viciousness of the upper castes.

Having said this, one is compelled to see the diverse efforts of the marginalized to change their conditions of existence. Not only the anonymous wealthy expatriates, such as the Australian, but also the indentured labor in Trinidad and Tobago and other West Indies as well as *the coolie* from South Africa were making strides as Tamil Buddhists by subscribing to *The Tamilan*. Despite the fact that they faced caste abroad as well (for instance, in South Africa as we saw in chapter one), the migrant laborers of the marginalized were able to find ways and means to counter it by establishing various organizations including Sakya Buddhist Association branches, and by enhancing their financial and cultural status. No wonder then they were in direct opposition to the upper castes and their associations such as Indian National Congress,

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<sup>243</sup> Beyond references to upper caste land holdings in various parts of colonial India, the human cost of upper caste control of resources such as land and finance, and their entry into modern industries through the colonial state remains an understudied topic.

<sup>244</sup> For a critical examination of Dalit capitalism see Anand Teltumbde, *The False Dalit of Capital* in *Tehelka.com* (2011) [http://www.tehelka.com/story\\_main49.asp?filename=Fw240511TheFalseDalit.asp](http://www.tehelka.com/story_main49.asp?filename=Fw240511TheFalseDalit.asp) (last accessed on June 4, 2011)

especially on the question of indentured labor and colonial government's interference on behalf of them. The following section examines these issues in detail.

### **Indentured Labor and Repatriation**

Titling his note "The Native Returnees," (*janma boomikku tirumbiyavarkal*), Thass reports that the two hundred and forty-six people who returned to Chennai from Natal, South Africa, appear to be very satisfied and twenty-six are planning to go back to work in South Africa in a month. Precisely he mentions that one returnee brought Rs. 2100 and another three brought Rs. 5187 each then. Using the statement from the "Immigrants Protector," Thass says that all the two hundred and forty six *coolie* members brought in Rs. 88415. Breaking it down for our purpose, this would mean that each laborer brought in an average of Rs. 359.41 per head as money earned from Natal. This was in 1911, and the money value then would have bracketed them all easily as middle, if not upper class. Given the positive spin-off of such money on their caste and class status, that is, their ability to agitate against caste using their current financial status, to organize themselves as Buddhists, and to educate their poor brethren, the marginalized could turn the difficulty of displacement and immigration into an opportunity to strike against caste.<sup>245</sup> This countervailing power of the marginalized to effect global and local changes is emphasized in Eric Eustace Williams when he says,

The Indian cane farmer in Trinidad, cultivating cane on a small plot of land which he had been allowed to buy in exchange for a return passage to India, represented a challenge in Trinidad to the traditional method of production in the British sugar colonies in the West Indies. To that extent the Indentured Indian immigrant, the last victim in the historical sense of the sugar plantation economy, constituted one of the most powerful social forces

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<sup>245</sup> Despite the plethora of Indian diasporic studies now, the caste angle and the historicity of it remains inadequately investigated.

for the future in the struggle for the establishment of a proper social structure and modern industrial relations.<sup>246</sup>

Clearly sensing the success of the indentured and the revilement that it would receive from the upper castes who could not bear the marginalized rising, Thass writes that the Indian National Congress is against the labor migration to South Africa only because they want to destroy the poor and thereby prevent their succeeding in life, and not because they are concerned about the problems of the poor who live abroad.<sup>247</sup>

It is to unveil furthermore the motives of the Congress and the upper castes who live in South Africa that Thass writes a four part serial. These and a commentary on an upper caste person's welcoming the derogatory category *coolie* only for the "lower castes" and not for all Indians exemplify Thass' critical interventions regarding the Indian diaspora in South Africa.<sup>248</sup>

Titling the first and second parts in English "An Enquiry into the Causes for Sympathy with Indians in South Africa" as well as its translation in Tamil below, Thass does not hesitate to write about the contradictions in the mainland Indians' sympathies for the Indian immigrants in South Africa. Foremost is his asking how the people in India who despise six crore (sixty million i.e., those who are discriminated as untouchables by the upper castes across India) fellow Indians walking on the street by tarnishing them as parayan, theyyan, and chandalan in the name of caste, who deny them accessibility to public facilities such as water, washermen, and hairdressers, and who give them only *one ana* (equal to three paise of a rupee in 1913) after

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<sup>246</sup> Williams, *History of the People*, 121

<sup>247</sup> *T* April 21, 1911.

<sup>248</sup> Gandhi also had problems with the usage *coolie* not because it was applied to the marginalized communities of the indentured labor but because it was applied to upper caste Indians in South Africa as well. For Gandhi's not-so-progressive understanding of racial relations in South Africa during his stay there as a financially successful legal practitioner see Geoffrey Ward, *Political Pilgrim*.

extracting the whole day's work and which has always kept them in emaciated status, could talk about the South African government denying certain rights to Indians.

On the contrary, Thass says that the Indians in South Africa undergo not even one fourth of the sufferings of those denigrated as lower castes in India. He insists that sympathizing and mobilizing funds for Indians in South Africa is tantamount to plastering the outer-wall while leaving the inner wall exposed or applying lime to one eye [which will burn it] while applying butter to the other [to cool] (these are popular Tamil aphorisms). Having said this Thass rejects the Indians' demand for the British government's intervention regarding racism and tax against Indians in South Africa on the grounds that there is unresolved "filthy-stench" (*kodunaatratal*) of caste in India. It is, therefore, preposterous for him to ask for the annulment of the law for tax against Indians in South Africa as racism when there is much worse brutality against those who are called lower castes in India and who suffer sub-human punishment such as *tolukkattai* (Thass calls this *tholoovoo*),<sup>249</sup> while the upper castes get away unhindered for all their crimes.<sup>250</sup>

In his second part on the indentured in South Africa Thass writes about some comments against *The Tamilan* (source is not mentioned) that it belittles the Indians' sympathy for the diaspora. He says that he welcomes Indians' concerns for the public; however, one should do so responsibly, he adds. For Thass points out that a few Indians in the mainland collecting money and organizing could only provoke the South African governmental actions against the diaspora. In case the diaspora is doomed, Thass asks, whether the Indians would rehabilitate them? Using the analogy of gooseberries for Indians and the difficulties involved in bringing them together

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<sup>249</sup> A corporal punishment of hanging a wooden bar of more than six feet and weighing many kilos on the neck of the accused lower caste person and making him/her stand in the sun till they collapse, and many die due to dehydration. More about this below.

<sup>250</sup> *T* December 10, 1913.

when they remain scattered, Thass says that the Indians are not trustworthy [due to the caste system]. Therefore, he concludes that the needless provocation of the Indians in South Africa is wrong.

Furthermore, questioning the appeal for the British intervention in South Africa, Thass asks poignantly “who is responsible for the Indian immigrants’ suffering in foreign nations” and answers that it is “those who wear the stink of caste,” (i.e., upper castes) that call the fellow Indians as untouchables and kill them directly and indirectly. From this he mocks that one is not able to figure out whether it is the same people who are the oppressors in India who also collect money for the relief of the diaspora. Since there is ignorance about the problems of the “original Indians” (*poorveeka Indians*), Thass writes further, that he will explain about them in comparison with the Indian diaspora in South Africa in subsequent parts.<sup>251</sup>

Thass titles his third and fourth parts on the indentured in South Africa in English “The Difficulties to which the South African Indians are Subjected and those to which the Ancient Inhabitants of India are Subjected—A Comparison,” [sic] which is also translated into Tamil as usual. He says that there were about one hundred and fifty thousand Indians in South Africa then, amongst who only one or two in a thousand would have gone on their own expense; the rest were all Indian *coolie* families (*indiac coolikkudikal*). Explaining that only when the British immigrated to South Africa that the Indians went there as *coolie* and these were less than thirty thousand currently, whereas the rest of one hundred and twenty thousand have become “free labor” after their indenture period, and have settled in agriculture and business since then. Interestingly, Thass says that around ten thousand *coolies* have returned to India with a hundred or two hundred sovereign of gold (if this calculation refers individually, then, the wealth status of

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<sup>251</sup> T December 17, 1913.

the marginalized and its implications in their politics is manifold). Admitting that he is familiar through the news reports and by the word of mouth that the poor *coolie* undergoes exploitation in farms and mines, however, he informs that their wages were paid and their food necessities were taken care of by even those exploitative colonial officials in South Africa. On the other hand, if they want to be relieved from their travails they must either quit working as *coolie* at once or leave South Africa after the indenture is over. Thass thus writes that the present crisis in South Africa is the result of those Indians who have become “free labor” and lead a good life but want more, and it is they who drag the *coolie* also into crisis against the South African government. Nevertheless, he suggests that there are only two options before the free labor: that they either quit South Africa or should function within its laws to seek redress.

In the last part of this series on the indentured in South Africa, which bears the same title as the third part, Thass continues his criticism of the Indians who are sympathetic to the diaspora. Viewing them as lying caste-masqueraders, Thass says that they not only denigrate the “original Indians” as lower castes and untouchables and influence those who come and go in the cities with such ideas, but that they also become slothful zamindars, mittadars, mirasudars, and surotiradarar holding large swath of lands in order to exploit the lower castes in rural areas. Detailing this exploitation of the marginalized, Thass writes about money lending and bonded labor: that when a landless laborer asks for five rupees to take care of his son’s marriage the interest for which is forced in the form of free labor right up to the grandson. Likewise when the son asks for two rupees to conduct his father’s funeral the free labor exploitation continues right upto his own son’s time. Thus the whole family is reduced to slavery just for the interest (as the borrowed money is never repayable by the poor). Moreover, Thass writes that these exploiters not only give a meager one *ana* or the equivalent amount of grains for the day-long labor, which

has made them into living skeletons, but also deny them potable water from wells and ponds, which has led to the poor dying from many diseases.

Furthermore, Thass writes that the laborers can never escape from this thralldom, and that when they try to run away they face a law against it. More importantly, he details the gruesome punishment *tholoovoo*<sup>252</sup> that is always reserved for the supposed crimes of the lower castes, especially those who are defined as untouchables. Thass says *tholoovoo* refers to a long wooden log (usually six or seven feet) with four holes. In two holes a lower caste man's hands are inserted and locked, and in two holes of the other log his legs are inserted and locked. He is left in the sun thereafter. The individual who suffers this cannot wipe his sweat, can not shoo the flies nor remove the ants that bite him. There will be none near him. If any of his relatives come close to help him they too will suffer the punishment. Thass asks the readers of *The Tamilan* whether such as inhuman punishment is witnessed in any other country, whether such gruesome-criminals (*padumpaavikal*) live anywhere else in the world. He argues that it is not that the media owners and social reformers do not know about this inequality of law between the upper and lower castes, but rather that they overlook it because "they would like the six crore people (sixty millions) to die in disgrace while they prefer the upper castes to reap all the benefits of life." To substantiate his observation he mentions the natural calamity in Chidambaram (a Saivite temple town in Tamil Nadu) in which the rainstorm and floods took a toll on the lower castes especially the *panchamars*. Thass asks whether any man or woman cared for these hapless people through donations and other generous acts.

From such narratives Thass concludes that since those who never looked at these six crore (sixty millions) in compassion, never cared for those who experience untold sufferings in

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<sup>252</sup> Thass's transliteration.

front of their own eyes, but indulge in atrocities in India, it is rather doubtful why they lament about a lakh [a hundred thousand] of people in South Africa, complain that the British do not care for them, and collect funds for them too. If they are honest about it, he says, they would have been more concerned about the intolerable conditions of many communities (*perungkudikalin*) in India as well. Since they have not bothered about what is happening here, but only talk about problems in other nations, they mask their ulterior motives behind why they do so. Thass ends suspensefully that he will write on this more soon.<sup>253</sup>

It would be fitting here to conclude Thass' views on South Africa with his words, as we saw in the first chapter, in reaction to one Nanasambanan of Transvaal writing in the brahmin newspaper *Sudesamitran* (now *The Hindu*) that it is a shame that all the Indians in South Africa are referred to as *coolie*, which actually should only be used to refer to the lower castes. Thass writes: "it is only because of what they do in India the Indians face a poetic justice in the form racial discrimination in Transvaal, and as for their actions in India they will reap what they have sown soon."<sup>254</sup>

Thass's position on Indians in South Africa might appear to be unpatriotic, especially given the studies on M.K. Gandhi's professional-turned-patriot success in South Africa. Probably, Thass's stand was in direct opposition to Gandhi, who lived in South Africa as a prosperous lawyer from 1893 to 1915. However, Thass's writings complicate the picture of the Indian diaspora with a subaltern criticism that was not there until then. To be sure, Thass was aware of the problems of Indians especially at the hands of the Europeans, but his investigation of the life of a *coolie* abroad and in India, in comparison, provides for no romanticism about the

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<sup>253</sup> *T* December 31, 1913.

<sup>254</sup> *T* March 4, 1908.



Indians abroad while turning a blind eye to “matters that are internal.”<sup>255</sup> For Thass, therefore, racism against Indians is no more or less than the casteism in India and abroad. The irony of those who indulged in caste atrocities directly and indirectly mobilizing funds and building a movement against racism was hypocrisy for Thass.

More importantly, while studies have rightly focused on the problems of indentured labor under colonialism, the other side of it being a great blessing to those who were oppressed under the caste system is poorly understood. Thass’s data on enormous amounts of money and gold that *the coolie* had repatriated and the role it played in transforming the conditions of the oppressed back in India, after all their pains as indentured labor, speaks volumes. Though for the upper castes, who had immigrated to make more money abroad through businesses and legal profession, facing racism at the hands of Europeans would have been like turning the caste-tables against them, but it was a different story for the lower castes, in Thass’s opinion. In fact, as he says, despite the harsh conditions in the farms and mines, the *coolie* had his food, got paid, and could become “free labor” to have a choice of his profession and make money like any native. Whereas, needless to say, that was not to be for the marginalized-by-caste in India.

However, the indentured-turned-freemen who stayed back in the migrated countries strengthened their ties with those in India, like the Australian, and began to represent themselves as casteless through establishing branch organizations such as Sakya Buddhist Association in Owenport, Durban and Natal in South Africa and publishing their own Tamil magazines such as

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<sup>255</sup> For instance, Government of India’s refusal to internationalize the problem of caste and saying that it is an internal matter (of India) at the UN Conference on Race in Durban 2001 only confirms the sagacity of Thass’s doubts and his making the connection between local and global defiance of caste. Thass’ insights are thus all the more valid today, as the honor killing is on the rise among the Indians in the US and Europe.

*African Chronicle*.<sup>256</sup> This was not only to refuse to be identified with the upper-caste Indians in South Africa then, but also to reclaim their identity as casteless Buddhists. True to their openness in South India, the Sakya Buddhist Association in South Africa was open to white people and others who were becoming Buddhists then. Therefore, going by the instances of the Australian and the Sakya Buddhist Associations in South Africa one can fairly conclude that the history of indentured labor and Indian diaspora assume greater significance when the problem of caste is tied to the investigation. Clearly, the marginalized diaspora spoke against caste both as expatriates and repatriates and claimed their casteless space, even as Buddhists.

Given the colonialist labor exploitation through the plantation economy around the world, Thass is rather sanguine about the conditions of those who were indentured abroad then.<sup>257</sup> However, the upper caste Indians breast-beating about racism in South Africa was glaringly contradictory and that the caste discrimination was no less abominable in comparison to racial practices that Thass did not mince words about how the marginalized could equip themselves globally in order to take on the caste forces locally.<sup>258</sup>

Though Thass advocated to retain the pro-emigration labor policy that would not only mitigate the caste based discrimination among Indians who go abroad but also empower the oppressed with repatriation of wealth, education, and experiences, he was also aware of the necessity to gain control over land and agriculture as the primary means of livelihood for the

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<sup>256</sup> *T* April 26, 1911 and March 13, 1912.

<sup>257</sup> For a detailed historical understanding of slave labor engineered by European powers within and outside Europe, and the struggle against slavery see Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *Multi Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, Ma: Beacon, 2000).

<sup>258</sup> The presence of international organizations such as Sakya Buddhist Association, Ambedkar International Mission, Anti-caste Association, and so on in the West continue to serve similar purpose today.

victims of caste in India. Knowing that the Congress and upper caste Indians were, however, against both, he asks, “are they [Congress and its upper castes] against allotment of vacant lands for cultivation [in India] and emigration to countries such as Natal [South Africa], so that the poor can prosper or die in degradation.”<sup>259</sup> In fact, Thass’s insisting on land allotment to the poor and oppressed castes was not just based on appealing to the benevolence of either the British or the upper castes. Rather, it was based on claiming land rights of those who work the land through their knowledge of agriculture for generations, which the British or upper castes lacked, even if they owned the lands on records. The next section will examine Thass’s understanding of agriculture, and land rights of the tiller as well as his criticism of the rich possessing lands through various categories.

### **Land to the tiller**

Thass writes in *The Tamilan* about famine conditions and the concomitant price rise of staple food grains, such as rice, often and at length. He says the quantity of rice came down from sixteen measures to three and a half measures for a rupee in the early twentieth century as the consequences of human rather than natural factors. In fact, he views that such disasters are inevitable and immanent in Hindu religious tenets, and the practices that result from it. This is apparent in his leader page writing titled in English “It is the Laws of Manu that Stand Today as the Bane of Agriculture,” [sic] which is translated in Tamil as usual. Quoting Manudharma Shastra’s tenth chapter and “eighty-fourth dialogue,” which says that some think that agriculture is a good profession whereas the learned viewed it as a curse, Thass asks those who indulge in caste discrimination and read and listen to such views whether they would ever esteem high the

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<sup>259</sup> *T* May 3, 1911.

profession of agriculture and its prosperity? Rather, true to Manu's insistence in the "second chapter" and eighth dialogue he asserts that they will instead only pay obeisance to such wrong understandings as Vedic wisdom of the Hindus. Thass concludes by arguing that because such Shastras are imagined as moral texts (*danmasastiramendrenni*) those who write, read, listen, and follow these will only lead this nation's agricultural profession (*itesattiya vivasaayatolil*) to ruin.

In contrast to Manudharma Shastra, Thass writes about the Buddhist views in Tamil literature such as "the wealth generated through agriculture is never inferior" (*meiliselvam kolaipadaatu*) and "the search for gifts leads one to the plough" (*seeraitedil yeraittedu*) that celebrate agriculture and helped the rulers and the ruled prosper. On the contrary, he says, that the advent of caste differences through the religions of fake god stories have only promoted the selfish-groups and engulfed others in famines (*pancattal paaladaintu*) and diseases. Even the British efforts to establish agricultural colleges, techniques, and capital (seeds, and equipments) have not made any difference because all of them are run by those (i.e., the upper castes) who do not have any compassion for the poor, says Thass. He insists that had such selfish groups, who prosper at the cost of others, shown equal amount of concerns as the British do, then, instead of just three-and-a-half measure of rice one would have gained thirty-measures for a rupee.

Therefore, Thass urges and hopes that such obscurantist dharma (*asattiya danmankalai*) is given up in order to follow Buddhist dhamma of compassion for the poor.<sup>260</sup> Here one needs to keep in mind that given his criticism of cash crops, such as peanuts, as spoilers of food grain cultivation and famines, Thass's perception of agricultural decline directly refers to food grain decline and impoverishment resulting from it, even though the cash crop production might have been on the rise.

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<sup>260</sup> T May 7, 1913.

In fact, Thass pinpoints two more causes (that germinate from Manu) as part of the reasons for the agricultural decline in the Madras presidency. He writes that Burma, China, Japan, and America were thriving in agriculture and export their produce because of a culture that does not discriminate agriculture as lesser than other professions. Rather, he finds a great support for “agricultural workers” (*vivasayttolilalikal*) among these nations, especially having a concern for the poor who work hard on the fields to take care of themselves and to pay back their debts. On the contrary, he views that in South Indian society Manudharma shastra has legitimized provisions that would guarantee the prosperity of caste leaders, on the one hand, and has reduced agriculture as menial work, on the other. That is, people believing in upper and lower caste divisions as truth, he argues, has only led to the decline of agriculture in general. Even though the Buddhist agricultural workers (*bavutta kootta velalatalilaalarkal*) resisted such tenets of the casteists they were not only reduced as lower castes (*taltasaatikalena*), but those agricultural workers who provided the capital for those who did not have the means till then now took to an upper caste name called Mudaliyar, based on the fact of their lending agricultural capital (*mudal eetal*). Such a privileged caste formation, through Manu, has not only affected mutual giving and taking of infrastructural capital that was crucial for agricultural prosperity. This for him is another reason for agricultural decline.

Nevertheless, he finds that the reduction of the hard working agricultural producers as lower castes and denial of public services such as clean drinking water, barbers, and washermen to them, have only led to their immigration (*palatesankalukkum sendru*) and alienation from their lands. This for Thass is also a crucial reason why agriculture in India declined.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> T January 3, 1912.

Continuing his investigation of agricultural decline, Thass says that some of the lazy scoundrels and destroyers of many families (*somberikalum, vanchakarkalum, kudikedarkalum,*) acquiring land ownership further strengthened the agricultural decline.<sup>262</sup> Just as they got the lands malevolently they also tricked people into cheap labor for three-fourth of an *ana* or one *ana* by lending rupees five, which would put the laborer's son and grandson in bondage with these landlords. These bonded laborers could never quench their hunger, and remained emaciated and clothe-less, therefore preferred to leave their homelands. Those who remained foodless could not even drink water from public sources because of caste. Since they drank dirty water, they perished in the process, Thass explains. Those who survived even such penury are not able to utilize the British government provisions for agriculture because of the upper castes who man them. Thus, Thass comes to the conclusion forthrightly that the agricultural decline in India then was primarily due to the upper caste discrimination of casteless poor (*saatipedamatra elaikudikal*) suffering, even preceding the arrival of the colonialists.<sup>263</sup> No wonder then that in comparison to what the upper castes have done to the oppressed and to agriculture he finds the presence of the British government as achieving the twin goals of redeeming the casteless poor and reviving the agricultural prosperity. Rather, Thass urges that the British should focus only on the casteless poor first by quenching their hunger and providing the infrastructural support to them. When this happens, he says, the marginalized would automatically not only prosper, but also work the land to prosperity because they will not have to face the evils of the upper castes.

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<sup>262</sup> *T* January 10, 1912.

<sup>263</sup> Here it is important to note that the Indian nationalists who spoke about the “drain theory” of colonialism never cared to bring about neither a caste critique nor stood against their own comprador nature in the agricultural decline of India.

On the other hand, as long as the poor people continue to suffer their caste discriminating enemies (*satrukkal*) as their masters, agriculture will never again get revived, he warns.<sup>264</sup>

It is in this context of upper caste land ownership and dehumanizing labor relations that Thass' admonishing that following the caste and religious leaders in any ways is tantamount to the goat following the butcher needs to be understood. Rather, he prefers the agricultural workers to learn from the British government research stations such as *Nelikkuppam* agri-institute.<sup>265</sup> To be sure, Thass welcomes self-efforts over governmental support and incentives for agriculture. Writing about Japan, he says that since they self-propel agriculture, they (seventy percent) not only prosper without dependence on the government, but also in smithery, tailoring, and other technical professions. Seeing the Japanese women shine in both agriculture and other professions Thass writes that Japan prospers by the industriousness of the Japanese. In contrast, Thass writes scathingly:

whereas in this nation by keeping caste discrimination and inventing religious shops in support of them have only led to making foods such as *vadai*, *payasam*, *thosai*, *neipongal*, and *sarkarai pongal* for the gods, but actually for the upper castes to gulp them down the throat like the ducks do. After such gluttony, they apply sandal paste all over the body in order to roll on the *thinnai* (raised platforms on either side of the house entrance). These are the inventions of this land. And to fight for *vadai* and *thosai* is the relentless profession of these people [upper castes]. Such inventors are the leaders of various castes, and those who do not surrender to their structures of caste and religion are made the lower castes anyhow. The preaching of this class (*inta vakuppin pedamo*) is that those who beg are upper castes, whereas those who work the land are lower castes... For such people making money by claiming that only their gods are gods, that since they are upper castes only they are entitled to begging by mediating between the gods and laity. These are their contributions to skills (*tolil viritti*). Would anyone learn any other good profession and prosper under such self-styled and caste-megalomaniacs.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> *T* January 10, 1912.

<sup>265</sup> *T* October 5, 1910.

<sup>266</sup> *T* October 5, 1910.

Needless to say, Thass's tirade against the upper castes is at times no holds barred. He also reposed faith in the British agricultural institutions, even as he pointed out the lack of policies that could produce overall agricultural progress of the *cultivators* and the country's development. It also needs to be noted, however, that Thass was also making a political economic examination of how the caste system, while ostensibly benefitting the upper castes, had also disintegrated the life of Indians in general. Arguably, thus, Thass hammers the point that the implications of caste and the lop-sided prosperity of some upper castes have to be taken lot more seriously, at least as much as the impact of colonialism in South Asia is examined today.

No wonder Thass concludes that if the people trust the caste and religious leaders, further destruction awaits them. Since India has been ruined because of hatred and indolence of the upper castes, Thass says, instead the citizens should reach out to the British governments' agricultural schemes to face the poverty they suffer.<sup>267</sup> It is in this context that his views on the *swadesis*, i.e., the nativists, become more relevant.

### **Rejection of the *Swadesis***

Providing a materialist criticism of the *swadesis*, Thass says that it is a misnomer to call them so, given the prejudices they practice and disparity in wealth they demonstrate. But land ownership is of singular importance in his indictment of these nationalists. In fact, Thass, with comparative statistics in hand remarks that in America eighty-seven out of a hundred persons are land-owning agriculturists whereas in India there are not even five in a hundred who are land

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid.



owners. This is to point out that the disproportionate ownership of land in India by those who do not work the land through the *andaiya paatiyam*, i.e., neighborhood-land-acquisition policy.<sup>268</sup>

Lamenting that there is no one to advise the British government about the deleteriousness of this policy—an euphemistic critique of the colonialists, in other words—Thass goes to explain the *andaiya paatiyam*. When an agriculturist works an acre of land and applies for a *darkastu* in order to take ownership of the land the adjacent landlord (usually from the upper castes), who owns a hundred acre or more but keeps it as uncultivated wasteland, can appropriate the land where the agriculturist has worked to turn it from a wasteland to a cultivable land by petitioning the government out of sheer covetousness. Interpreting this as a desire to prevent others from prospering like oneself, Thass says that it is due to such greedy rogues (*paerasaikonda pamanikalin*) that only less than five in a hundred of those who work the land have ownership.

Clearly, Thass reads “the stench of caste” as a reason behind such a policy. Explaining that when a *parayan* applies for a *darkastu* near a *paappaan*’s land (brahmin’s land) the latter uses the provision of neighborhood-land-acquisition to chase him away; whereas when another *paappaan* applies for *darkastu* it is granted. The coming together of one lazy-fellow with another (referring to the brahmin owners not-working the land) still needs the work of a *parayan* to make the land cultivable, since the brahmins lack the agricultural knowledge. If another intelligent *parayan* (*vivekamulla parayan*) owns a piece of land near the *paappaan*, out of envy the *paappaan* conspires to destroy the *parayan*’s crops and drought animals. If the *parayan* files a case against the *paappaan* to the collector then it is referred to the Tehsildar, who in turn passes the investigation to the Muncifs and Kanakkan (lower officials). Since the Kanakkan and Muncifs are in the hands of the *paappaan* they cook up that the *parayan*’s land actually belongs

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<sup>268</sup> T October 19, 1910.

to commons, and thus evict him from the land he worked and lived. Here Thass writes poignantly about the adage that the knot put by the Kanakkan's leg is untieable even by the collector's hands.

For these reasons, Thass wants the collector to deal with the complaints of the marginalized directly. Instead, delegating these issues to the Muncif and Kanakkan have only led to the complaints against the government. Furthermore, he points out that such deception of those who work the land through the unbearable stench of caste has only led to their migrating (*sitaripoividukirarkal*) to other nations. Thass, therefore comes to the conclusion that those who seek *swadesi* reforms are actually the cause (*moolam*) for its destruction, and it is the duty of the learned to weed out such causes.<sup>269</sup>

Thass's insistence on land to the tiller policy and his instruction to the British government to implement it, through *The Tamilan* and direct petitioning, is the crux of his perception of the land problem in India. This is made further vivid in his writings on agriculture, particularly in a piece titled as a question "Should more lands be given to those who have or to the landless?" Thass answers it in the opening sentence that lands have to be distributed among those who do not have. However, he urges "when there is a petition for land distribution, instead of the Tehsildars and Muncifs looking into it, the British collector should meet with them and see who carry the ploughs on their shoulders and labor in the land. When entitlements are made to such toilers not only the wastelands will turn into fertile cultivable lands but also the poor will prosper."<sup>270</sup> This further speaks about his views on local Indian officials.

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<sup>269</sup> *T* February 5, 1908.

<sup>270</sup> *T* October 19, 1910.

Criticizing the local administration Thass writes that instead of such a poor-oriented land policy giving more lands to those who revel in aristocracy (*duraitanattil*) such as the eighty-acre owning Zamindars, seventy-acre owning Mittadars, and sixty-acre owning Mirasudars will not only make them and their families shiftless, but will lead to the emaciated death of those who labor in them because the former usurp the fruits of their labor. He argues, thus, that giving more lands to those who already have will result in the twin consequences of lands falling in fallowness, more importantly the poor are impoverished further. However, he reiterates that the “recent invention” of caste-discriminating atrocities as the crux of this problem.

Thass clarifies this connection between caste and famine by explaining that when the Tehsildar, Muncif, and Zamindar are all upper castes, they would not know the toils of those who work their lands, especially since the former classify the latter as lower castes. More importantly, he points out that if the Tehsildar or Muncif or Kanakkan has lands or their relatives have lands then one could not imagine the travails of those poor farmers who live nearby. Using the popular saying in Tamil “one becomes a child of those who ever lift,” Thass says that those who are named lower castes (*siriya saatiyenap peyar petrullon*) have to cultivate the lands of the upper castes for almost free.<sup>271</sup> If they refuse to work, then, they will face the wrath of those who call themselves upper castes and who are also officials in the British administration to the extent of losing one’s possessions, including kith and kin.<sup>272</sup>

On the contrary, Thass writes that if ten or twenty of those who toil the land have ownership in every Jillah, then collectively they can face the trickery of Kanakkans, Muncifs,

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<sup>271</sup> For a historical understanding of agriculture and its relation to socio-cultural and linguistic life in Tamil Nadu, albeit of a caste “Kallar” (also known as Tevar), who are also seen as one of the “marginal groups.” See Anand Pandian, *Crooked Stalks: Cultivating Virtue in South India*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 9.

<sup>272</sup> *T* October 19, 1910.

and Tehsildars, by reporting to the British collector and finding solutions to their problems boldly. Instead if only two or three of those who toil have land ownership in every Jillah, then they too become runaways because of the persecution of Zamindars, Mittadars, and Mirasudars. He appeals, therefore, to the British government to show keenness in making sure that by providing land entitlements the agricultural lands not only expand but the toiling poor also prosper like anybody else.<sup>273</sup>

As if to let the readers of *The Tamilan* know that Thass was not simply talking in the air about the rapacity of the troika i.e., Tehsildar-Municipal-Kanakkan, he makes an open petition of land demand in Tindivanam taluk through *The Tamilan* itself. Titling this piece “A petition to the Tehsildars, Municipals, and Kanakkans of the villages Melpakkam, Panchalam, and Saattanoor of Tindivanam taluk” Thass courageously writes that the officials of these villages did not show concern for the people that they showed to the cattle when they denied their demand for the allotment of a thousand acre wasteland to the village poor saying that they are grazing lands.<sup>274</sup>

However, Thass asks whether if the thousand acres does not help the citizens (*kudikal*) and the government but only the cattle then of what use was it to the government? If so, then there is no point in keeping that much for grazing; rather, according to Thass a six hundred of which would suffice for the cattle, and the rest four hundred ought to be allotted to the poor citizens,—this still demonstrates his pathos of demanding less for humans and more for cattle. No wonder then, Thass mentions, that the poor citizens have written to the governor with this land demand, since the Indian officials never showed generosity to people that they showed to the cattle. Most importantly, Thass mentions that they have failed to implement even the British

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> *T* December 28, 1910.

law, which says that wherever the *Panchamar* show a vacant land it should be allotted to them.<sup>275</sup> He writes that this *Panchamar* law came into being in 1902.<sup>276</sup>

Linking the demand for land with the campaign for Depressed Classes (DCs) development, Thass writes that if these lower officials fulfill the demand for land and the law in this regard, they will be celebrated at par with those who claim that they collect money and work for the DCs. On the other hand, if they practice favoritism by allotting lands only to those who are their kith and kin and the rich (read upper castes), and neither fulfill the *Panchamar* law nor the age old demand of the poor for a thousand acre, then, all pretensions about doing service for the poor, including the efforts for the DCs in urban areas will come under criticism. In fact, Thass makes a veiled threat that the poor will have to switch to alternative identities than being classified as ‘Hindus’— his campaign for Indian Buddhist status of the marginalized begins around this time, as we saw in the previous chapter. He appeals, therefore, to the village officials to implement the demand for a thousand acre.<sup>277</sup>

The significance of agriculture in the lives of Indians in general, the oppressed castes in particular, influenced Thass’s perception of how India should find its own way of development, in spite of the colonial modernity. This is profoundly clear in the way Thass wrote about the role of education in Indians’ life. Sensing that the upper caste Indians were grabbing the colonial education with enthusiasm in order to become colonial officials, and to turn themselves in to castes with power (*adikarasatikāl*) merely through acquiring BA and MA degrees, Thass criticism the unproductiveness of such education for degrees. In his rejection of the existing

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<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> *T* May 3, 1911.

<sup>277</sup> *T* December 28, 1910.

priorities of education Thass not only chastises the upper castes who queued up to become the higher degrees holders on the one hand, and perpetrators of caste oppression masquerading under colonial power, on the other, but also finds fault with colonial government's wrong mode of education that does not augur well for India.

Education and knowledge for Thass, therefore, are for Indian society's regeneration, and not for producing degree holders who would exercise administrative power. However, importantly, Thass does not reject modernity as such; rather he demands it as a universal necessity for material transformation. It is because of this understanding he finds problems with the British not treating India at par, since their educational policy in India did not promote agriculture and handicraft [manufacture] as it should have but only aimed to produce administrative personnel. An explanation of Thass's understanding of education is in order here.

### **Education, not for Degrees, but for Agriculture and Skills**

Titling his leader page as a question Thass asks "Are BA and MA Degrees more important than Agricultural and Knowledge Prosperity." At the outset he says hankering after the higher educational degrees will only benefit one's family, whereas education that focuses on agriculture and knowledge expansion will promote the whole nation's well being. Here he refers to the holistic development of Japan and America again by their focus on agricultural and manufacturing expansion. In contrast, Thass says that India has many who have prestigious degrees (*gauratapattam petror*), but they do not have anything that would promote and protect their countrymen. Thass writes, therefore, that it is useless to acquire degrees; instead, he wants people to expand their knowledge, agricultural, and business skills, which would promote not only their own wealth but also others.

Naturally, then, Thass finds faults with the British government's "higher the degree higher the office one holds policy." This has made people go after higher education only for the sake of "government jobs," and has blunted their desire to expand their skills in other fields such as agriculture, he says. In fact, he writes that it is because of the increase in the number of those unemployed with higher degrees that they have become anti-government [British] forces. Rather Thass wants a policy at the school, which would serve the interest and efforts of the children, and help them get exposed to education in agriculture, engineering, arts, as well as government administration. Such a policy, he emphasizes, will not only help "all classes" (*sakala vakupparum*) prosper through various skills but also inspire the government to utilize their skills as well, if they are determined to do so.

Furthermore, Thass holds the British responsible for the stagnation in education and the lack of development of India. Writing that neither do the current British policies promote knowledge skills nor do all classes participate in the administrative positions, he points out two reasons for this situation: one, that the British government's treatment of Indians differently, since they are trained only for government jobs and not for overall development of India as the Europeans and the British are trained to do in their countries. Two, that those who succeed in government jobs, with their BAs and MAs, gang up and oppress all other Indians. Such a policy for him has produced two groups of Indians in turn: one that is interested only in getting degrees through rote, and the other that is interested in skills such as agriculture but without any infrastructural support. In short, he unpacks the colonial educational priorities that promote divisions among Indians, with which caste power could align seamlessly.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> *T* January 18, 1911.

On the other hand, in order to substantiate his views that caste blunts the collective benefit of technologies, Thass writes another article titled “Which is Education? It is Real Discriminating One, Or It is the Maintenance of One’s Own Family?” [sic]. He says education through experience (*kandu padikkum padippu*) will expand one’s knowledge and technologies (*vittaikal*) using the materials in nature such as metals, wood, minerals, cotton, and grains, which not only benefit one’s family but also the society as a whole. Taking the tramway as instance, he says that the one who invented it was not a BA or MA holder, rather a man who expanded his technical skills through his own society’s language, and materials in nature, such as metals and electricity. This invention has not only benefited the inventor’s family but the whole society’s travel. Mentioning that Colombo and Rangoon have benefited from this mode of transportation, Thass says, whereas when a company wanted to establish the same in Chennai those who are with “deadwood mind” (*ulakkai putti*) i.e., upper castes, put a condition that the Parayars should not be appointed as the ticket collectors. Therefore, Thass comes to the conclusion that due to such caste desiring deadwood minded neither the nation will grow nor its people will reform. However, he points out that those brahmins who put the caste conditions that the Parayars should never be the ticket collectors have themselves become as such with leather bags hanging from their shoulders, and do not hesitate to ask for ticket-money from those Parayars they begrudge. This reveals the trickery behind their caste conditions to any keen observer, Thass says.

In contrast to education by experience, Thass writes about education without experience (*kandu padikka padippu* or *kaanaap padippu*). These for him manifest in those with titles such as Navalar, Pavalar, and Shastri and those who have BA and MA degrees.<sup>279</sup> Thass emphasizes that these titles and degrees have only benefitted the holders’ families, and useless for the society

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<sup>279</sup> These are titles given in honor of their erudition. Notably, these titles were always conferred on upper castes by their own clubs and institutions then.



in general. Many hankering after such “useless education” (*payanatra padippai*) and degrees has only left out various knowledge and agricultural skills. A BA holder, therefore, only runs a sniff-powder or coffee shop or has become a conductor or a paper-man or an insurance agent or establishes a *swadesi-shop*—one can see the pun intended—he writes. No wonder Thass urges that people should come back to education with experience, which will not only expand the agricultural and technological skills but also benefit the nation at large.<sup>280</sup>

On the other hand, apart from discussing the British policy of education, Thass examines the ‘Hindu’ mode of education as well. Here too he classifies two modes of education, but with a difference: one “wasteful education” (*tendappadippu*) and the other, “education by experience” (*kanduppadi*). The former’s methodology is reproducing what is given by rote, and not being in a position to apply what one has learnt to help oneself and one’s own family, whereas the latter is about learning arts, handicraft, and manufacture, which can provide many benefits (*sakalasukanggalaiyum*) to oneself and others. Relating “wasteful education” method with who he calls “meaningless Hindu *swadesis*,” Thass says that the Hindus could only have had purposeless schools, unlike the schools and schools of ethics (*arappallikal*) that the Buddhists had instituted.<sup>281</sup>

It is this understanding that neither the British policy of education and employment nor the Hindu mode of education as relevant for India’s regeneration makes Thass critically examine Ghokale’s campaign for free education for Indian children. While welcoming his concern for education of children, Thass says that education is a public matter. Therefore, Gokhale (a renowned leader of the Congress) interacting only with his coterie, smacks of surreptitious

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<sup>280</sup> *T* December 4, 1912.

<sup>281</sup> *T* March 29, 1911.

motives behind the campaign for free education. One of which is, he writes, making teachers out of the educated unemployed i.e., upper castes, by establishing many schools. Moreover, Thass asks why free education was needed even for Indians who are rich enough to establish schools for others? Instead of such a campaign, he recommends that in every municipality people should establish schools that on the one hand cleanse caste and religion, and promote egalitarian values and vocational education, on the other. On the contrary, mobilizing for free education among one's own network is to fulfill exclusionary interests in the name of public, which will not only deceive the poor but also put an end to current government's public policies that are there for the disadvantaged, Thass writes.<sup>282</sup>

More importantly, Thass principally disagrees with Gokhale's idea of free education for children on the ground of existing caste discrimination. That is, he points out that more than sixty millions are dehumanized in India in the name of caste to the extent that the parents are fighting for food and clothes. In such a situation campaigning for their children's education is being insensitive (*mandanilai*) to such families' social conditions. Sceptically, Thass concludes his views on Gokhale that the Congress has never cared about the problems of caste and the oppressed, rather it has served only the members' [upper castes'] selfish motives, and Gokhale being an office bearer in such an organization and saying that he has not even spoken about caste discrimination is meaningless.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> *T* August 9, 1911. Thass's observations on the irony of the wealthy upper castes demanding free education from the British (even as the upper castes denied such a right to the marginalized communities) is relevant today. That is, the upper castes are in a position to establish "private" schools of their own that have put the state run "public" school system in India, on which those who are discriminated by caste depend for education, to a deterioration and disadvantage. Needless to say, Thass's criticism that upper castes could preempt the marginalized communities' education through the colonial state becomes a truism regarding the post-colonial India's educational system as well.

<sup>283</sup> *T* August 16, 1911.

Arguably, Thass's perception of education is not to pander to the colonial demands or to grease its administrative machinery. Instead he has an eclectic and universal understanding of learning, discovering, and inventing as indispensable necessities of humanity and for its transformation beyond the borders of territory, religion, and culture. This is clear in the way he senses the role of modernity in Asia as much as in Europe and America and its life changing impact in agrarian societies through technologies. Thus he is not anti-modern. On the other hand, given the caste, religious, and gender aspects of agrarian servitude experienced by communities such as Parayars, Thass is advocating a revamping of educational policies and institutions that would neither toe the line of the colonial government nor the upper castes but focus on the industrial and agrarian development of the Indian society as a whole.

Despite the oppression on lower caste communities, Thass does not desire a program of education that would favor only the disadvantaged. Rather his attack on BA and MA degrees, education without experience, caste in public transport, and so on, and the demand for the expansion of agricultural and technological skills were not only to displace the colonial and upper caste motives, but to keep the universal transformation of India in place, which will change the conditions of the poor as well. This anti-caste view does not allow him to entertain any policy for the marginalized that may re-inscribe their segmented development, much worse, impose a segmented identity on them. In this context, understanding Thass's reactions to the colonial government floating the Depressed Classes category for the marginalized and the Congress members promoting it becomes relevant.

### Depressed Classes Category Rejected

Thass's criticism of upper castes clamoring for higher education, becoming the officials in the colonial administration, and indulging in caste discrimination for their prosperity does not reproduce the voice of the oppressed through rehashed caste identities. That's why he refers to the Parayars and others more as poor and lower castes collectively, as a criticism against and rejection of such imposed caste categories that degrade them as binary opposites of groups to flaunt their caste status. In addition, this is also because of Thass's perception of caste-free Buddhists being cast into the mold of caste, as we have seen before. It is no wonder, then, that he was mortally against the category Depressed Classes (DCs), legitimized by the colonial government (as early as 1892 by Tremenhere, the sub-collector of Chengalpattu in the Madras Presidency)<sup>284</sup> and welcomed by the upper castes, as yet another exclusionary project standing against the progress of the marginalized. True to his views on educational and agrarian reorganization for all, Thass was not willing to settle for a condescending and piece-meal engineering, if at all there was any, in the name of DCs. Through a variety of questions and rebuttals, therefore, Thass pooh-poohs the veracity of the category DCs, which need deeper analysis.

With his usual candor Thass writes under the title "Who is a Higher Class Person and Who is a Depressed Class Person?"[sic]. In other words, he makes a concept-metaphor investigation of what it is to be a high or low person. He says:

[A] higher class person is one who is empathic (with all creatures), multifaceted, devoted, generous, equanimous, ethical, inclusionary, faithful, non-stealer, teetotaler, and truthful. It is such a person who becomes learned and recognized as someone belonging to high-

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<sup>284</sup> For Tremenhere's views on the upper caste politics on land acquisition and its impact on the Parayars see J. H. A. Tremenhere, *A Note on paraiyahs of Chenglepet*, ed., V. Alex, (Madurai: Ezhuthu, 2009).

section (*periasaati*) of human community. On the other hand, one is a depressed class when one persecutes others, becomes a skill-less lazy person, believes in others without self-examination, lacks temperance, amasses wealth through greed and lies, indulges in unethical-conduct (*tunmarkam*), infidelity, alcoholism, and murder. That is, people with ill-will, destructive, and exclusionary tendencies are the low sections. It is those who reform such low sections become high sections. However, since those who work for the poor need to be generous, and those who want to impart knowledge need to be the learned, it is a shame if one claims to reform others when one lacks wisdom and the wherewithal. This could only be clear when one makes a deep investigation; shallow conclusions would lead to disgrace.<sup>285</sup>

If the above write up is incomprehensible due to Thass' examination of metonymic meanings of being a "low" and "high" class person, in the very next issue of *The Tamilan* he directly addresses his reservations on DCs with a question mark, "Uplifting the Lower Castes?" He says that it is ambiguous when one says that one wants to uplift the lower castes because it is not clear whether one is trying to rescue those who have self-destructed themselves as low or those who have been oppressed (*taaltappattu*) by the trickery of others. Using the analogy of a person who is drowning in a well, Thass says that it will be ridiculous and suspicious if one says that one is going to rescue the person who they pushed down craftily due to hatred. Having pushed first, and then claiming to rescue the person from the well is tantamount to either to put an end to the still surviving victim who might come out on his/her own or by the rescuing efforts of others, other than the one who pushed. Thass says, therefore, such claims to help should never be trusted and taken for granted. This is better understood through what Christopher Bracken calls "inclusive exclusivism" in the context of the First Nations' relations with the Canadian government.<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> *T* May 3, 1911.

<sup>286</sup> Christopher Bracken, "Sui Generis: Aboriginal Title and the State of Exception," *Ariel*, 35,1-2, (2004), 7-30

The above observation is substantializable through yet another of Thass's interrogating title "Those who said that we are all Hindus, Why do they say the Panchamas should not join the public funds?" Thass opens his piece on Hindus by saying "he hopes that those who call themselves as Hindus would pay attention to the following," obviously by counting himself out from such a group.<sup>287</sup> Thereafter he writes that it is well known some people with wisdom have written in "Hindu magazines" that the British Census Commissioner has sought to divide the integrity of the Hindus by instructing the public that the caste divisions and their leaders have to be recorded. However, such critics of the census commissioner have not seen any of the pamphlets and magazines that say anyone other than the Panchamas i.e., Parayars, could join the public funds that are currently floated by them, he states derisively. This is because, Thass explains, those who have created the deceptive-stories to prop up the caste divisions have done so only for their self-serving motives and are working now to create a Hindu majority (*perunkootattorai*) in government records again for the same reason, thus to benefit both ways. However, it is the same people i.e., the upper castes, fearing that the poor will also prosper, like themselves, have written against the Panchamas joining the public funds. Thass asks pointedly, therefore, "those geniuses who advertize and prohibit the Panchamas from money spinning funds what right do they have to say that the latter are Hindus." He proceeds to answer that this is because of their caste-business (*saatitolilin*), which says that there is no talk of caste in places where the upper castes stand to gain automatically, whereas wherever and whenever the Panchamas demand their share they suffer caste-discrimination of the upper castes, so that the

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<sup>287</sup> A position different from Ambedkar whose much quoted stand was "I was born a Hindu, but will never die as one."? Ambedkar's views on DCs are also different in the sense he is more open to its application for the benefit of the marginalized, including the Dalits and other lower castes. See *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*. Vol. 5 ed., Vasant Moon (Bombay: The Education Department, Maharashtra Governement, 1989).

latter could garner all. For these reasons, Thass wants those who follow such geniuses of deception to critically investigate their claims of reforming the DCs. Because, he further asks, whether those who are not willing to admit the Panchamas to invest their own money in public funds, which will benefit them through their own effort, be interested in donating money for the DCs. Emphatically answering that they never will and, on the contrary, what they say is only a lie, and nothing but a lie (*poi, poi, poi yendre poruntum*), Thass writes that those who are discriminated in public funds as Panchamas, but incorporated as Hindus should never trust and join the opportunists.

On the contrary, Thass recommends that it will be a blessing if the poor who wish to save should join the British “savings bank” and those who want to prosper through education and vocational-skills, without joining the DCs Mission, should rather join the Protestant Christian Mission. Exposing that the DCs Mission is tantamount to upper castes spreading “religious shops” (*madakkadaikalai*), i.e., creating caste-shops, Thass concludes that the poor should never trust the upper castes/ Hindus nor join their “caste funds” but plan on their own.<sup>288</sup>

Thass’s critical engagement with the problem of caste so far has not revealed his understanding of the position of women in India especially in relation to caste. Does caste have any implication on the conditions of women in India? Could Thass see any connection between caste and gender? It is to such series of questions that we now turn.

### **Women of the Marginalized**

Thass’s criticism against caste among the Hindus and his perspectives of the marginalized did not stop with looking at socio-cultural history of India only from the point of

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<sup>288</sup> T August 2, 1911.

view of the communities such as the Parayars. The position of women in India equally animates Thass's thoughts and actions as well as his associates. Thus, *The Tamilan* as a platform for anti-caste ideas and an impetus for organizing a movement against the caste-Hindu-order, did not just remain the universe of and for the poor and lower castes. It was also a space in which the voice of women remained a concomitant inseparably. This was not just in Thass's hermeneutics of Tamil Buddhism. Rather, given the conditions of women then, radical possibilities of women's emancipation were articulated by women themselves as well as by men, as much as the problem of caste was. Themes ranging from global and local news clippings about women performing feats, data on widows, child marriage, dowry murder, sati, women's educational achievements abroad as well as the lack of it in India, and so on, were regularly present in *The Tamilan*.

More importantly, an exclusive "Ladies Column" in which women *and* men wrote on a variety of topics including education, social mores, child marriage, marriage, sexuality, and widowhood, was a great eye opener. Likewise the serialized themes on women's health, radical rejection of customs of marital symbols (such as tying-a-knot around the bride's neck (*taali*), the bride wearing a toe-ring (*metti*)), even the very institution of marriage itself, as well as holding men as the cause for all the woes of women came to preoccupy the pages of *The Tamilan* from the inaugural issues to the last issue. In the context of the early twentieth century marginalized women and men coming together to reflexively realize the inseparability of caste and gender necessarily opens questions that were not otherwise present. It is only imperative that their impact is given a systematic analysis.

The very fourth issue of *The Tamilan* carries a piece on women's education. Despite the ambiguous title "Uneducated Woman is Husband's Enemy," the lady author C S Ambal—who we saw as Swapneswari in the first chapter—makes a strong case for women's education, even if



one prefers to remain a homemaker. Explaining that education refers to all that is learnable (not just getting degrees, in other words) Swapneswari says that education has to be holistic incorporating the three elements of knowledge skills, morals and, universality (*arivunool*, *aranool*, and *akilanool*) and should serve as a companion and guide for men and women. On the other hand, arguing that being uneducated is equal to living like irrational creatures she also says that if the husbands want to have complete satisfaction in the family life they must see to it that their wives are educated. Furthermore Swapneswari insists that having education will only enhance one's inquisitiveness and fame, like all learned people, and last longer than the beauty of the body and wealth. Since this piece is structured to write about the value of education for women in general as well as for married women, citing the poet Tiruvalluvar that since only education will only remain permanent source of support for humanity, she concludes that educating married women has to be a marital vow (*vivakakkadamai*).<sup>289</sup>

In fact, *Sarvajana Sakotiri* (Universal Sister), as Swapneswari signs off in the weekly, writings on education, child marriage, and widow remarriage, among many other themes distinguished her contribution to *The Tamilan* extraordinary in nature. Emancipation of women in general, irrespective of caste, religion, and nation, is the core of Swapneswari's position. To be sure, one can view that she is still trying to salvage some leverage for women "within the male order of Indian society," and thus she is rather a conservative feminist. Given the impracticability of women undoing such lop-sided gender roles and privileges in one fell swoop, she advocates education for women in ways that would make their life lot bearable. However, considering the tragedies of women in the early twentieth century India, in fact, Swapneswari

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<sup>289</sup> *T* July 10, 1907. The author C S Ambal, who was the editor of a women's magazine of her own *Tamil Maadu*, and the manager of a widow home, remains a regular contributor of women's points of view to the weekly. She was a close friend and confidante of Thass as demonstrated by her editorial in *Tamil Maadu* on *The Tamilian*. *T* August 14, 1907.

boldly campaigns in public and radically writes about the male centered law and justice and social mores.

For instance, in an abstractly titled piece “Hindu Women’s Educational Institutions and Stick Dance,” she embarks on a narrative on education itself that brings home the point of universal education, especially for the girl children. As we saw in her writing “Uneducated Woman is Husband’s Enemy,” Swapneswari develops her thoughts on holistic education, which for her is “learning” (*karkappaduvatu*) through all senses as well as “doing” (*seivatu*, *nadappatu*)—resonating Thass’s views of *kandupadikkum padippu* i.e., education by doing. However, this learning and doing also involves one shedding immorality (*turkunam*) and wrongdoings (*turseyalkal*) and acquiring morality (*narkunam*) and ethical practices (*narseikaikal*), which suggest Sakotiri’s Buddhist proclivities. While seeing and hearing could also be the tools of education, for Swapneswari learning and teaching through books remains the paramount. This is because since it encompasses more, and indulging in them young is the right time, she says, by citing Tamil poets Tiruvalluvar, Avvai, and Naanmanikkadikai.

In this discursive on education, Swapneswari’s narration turns sharp when she says that, more than men, women should take learning and right conduct more seriously in order to acquire right character. When one begins to feel the conservative *telos* of her discourse and asks why she does so, her criticism against male-centered logics of Indian society comes to the fore. Pointedly Swapneswari says that in Indian society men get away with no reprimand irrespective of the damages of their actions, whereas women even if their action is equal to a mustard seed, the society makes a mountain out of a mole hill. Parents, relatives, husband, and acquaintances are no exception in such acts against women, she says. Here she writes trenchantly about how people stoop down to say that education leads women to prostitution because they say that they

now know how to write to the paramour. Calling such conservatives as full-blind-obscurants (*mulu-moodach-sikamanikal*), she still appeals for education as the only way out for women. To be sure, Swapneswari's insistence on education for girls and women, and their training in vocational skills gets mystified by her rejection of stick and other forms of dance, drama, and western women's ways of living as not useful to the lives of Indian women.<sup>290</sup>

On the other hand, Swapneswari's demand for an alternative method of women's education comes from a radical criticism of the privileges that men accrue through learning and through literary profession. In fact, her exasperation with women not taking education seriously, which is therefore marked by the dominance of a few men, leads to Swapneswari's skepticism about achieving equality in education between women and men. As if to comment on the predominance of men as a liability (*aksharapiyasam*) because of their discrimination against women's education, she views that the present educational system only leads to destructive ways (*turseikai*) of living and recurrence of lies to cover them. In comparison she says that the ancient times were more liberal in letting women master and produce literary texts at par with men—she means the ancient Tamil women poets and their contributions since the early first millennium. Again, Swapneswari writes, this time taking on the pundits i.e., males and their honorary titles, that the meanings of these titles are not even comprehensible to those who adorn them, let alone them explaining it to others. In fact, she goes on to write, “they [pundits (*panditarkal*)] sing songs for the village, for relatives, for those who come and go, for the dead, for those who are going to die, for those who give, and for those who do not give. The world gives such people titles such as *padakar*, *paavalar*, and *naavalar*, but they actually do not have any difference from

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<sup>290</sup> T April 5, 1911.

those uneducated women who also sing.”<sup>291</sup> Swapneswari surmises, therefore, that “such an education, singing ability, and assuming the status of a pundit [by males] is actually redundant.”<sup>292</sup> This is not only a clear rejection of men clamoring for titles and power through their abstruse creativity but also a rejection of the current educational system as useless and without it the women are no worse—this is similar to Thass rejecting the BA and MA degrees of the upper castes, but extends the criticism to the Tamil society itself as a corollary. However, Swapneswari was not against women’s education itself as we saw above.

Instead, by citing ancient Tamil poets (men and women) Tiruvalluvar, Avvai, and Manimekalai, Swapneswari appeals that like the *Sangam* Tamil literature (i.e., the classical Tamil literature) the current education should focus on morality, wisdom, and health. Because these can lead to not only investigation of truths, but also sharing one’s talents for others’ learning and doing should be the mark of the learned, she says. Swapneswari concludes by evoking the Tamil aphorism, which says that things are made for sharing, books are made for right action (*araneri*), and words are meant for compassion (*arulpurantu*)—this is yet another moment of her Buddhist proclivities. For Swapneswari these are ways that the learned have to live and others need to follow.<sup>293</sup>

Swapneswari’s championing of women’s education, her views against the predominance of men, their superfluous status as pundits, the world that legitimizes them, and the then system of education favoring males, pales in front of her criticism of the apathy about child marriage, which she says affect men and women profoundly. Titling her piece, “The Tragedies of Child

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<sup>291</sup> These refer to their ability to sing.

<sup>292</sup> *T* August 14, 1907.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*

Marriage,” Swapneswari produces what could be interpreted as a comprehensive radical feminist criticism of child marriage. In fact, this serves as a lens to problematize quite a few elements of Indian social life in general, such as, the role of Hindu doctrinal marital codes, brahminical patriarchy, the four Varnas mirroring the Hindu doctrines, insensitivity to women’s and men’s sexuality, the practice of feticide, and the tragedy of women’s collusion instead of organizing against child marriage. These, for her, are as much the causes as well as the consequences of child marriage.

What is Swapneswari’s stand on child marriage? She writes that there are two kinds of people in Indian society who follow marriage rules: either according to Hindu doctrines such as *sruti* and *smriti* or by the practices of their forebears. Though they may be Hindus who follow various Hindu gods and goddesses, and their socio-cultural practices may differ in various ways; however, their caste and religious (Saivite or Vaishnavite) every-day life differences do not stand against their practice of child marriage, she says. Noting that the brahmins are the ones who patronized this practice largely, she explains that the arrival of the Muslim rule had complicated the financial and educational status of the Indian rulers and the ruled and the autonomy of women, resulting in the child marriage becoming the norm in order to guard women’s modesty (*karpunilai*)—this resonates the Hindu patriarchal and Orientalist views then. On the other hand, Swapneswari views that the Hindu texts such as *sruti* and *smriti* insist that delay in marriage of girls who have attained puberty will only lead to the loss of their virginity (*penpativirataiyallaa*) to Indiran, Chandran, and Kaman (i.e., pre-marital relationships), and the father who delays the marriage of the girl who has attained puberty, is actually killing the children she would have conceived with every ovulation.

Examining the veracity of such claims in Hindu texts, Swapneswari says that these rules of marriage are not from gods but human invention, and that such codes are not universal even within Hindu society. Arguing that many challenges in terms of population increase, inadequate space and fresh air leading to diseases, and not having right remedies for illnesses are the result of such obscurantism of marriage rules, she condemns them as meaningless institutionalization. She reasons that while even nature is not for premature ripening of fruits, human society sacrificing its young to child marriage is puzzling and plain wrong.

After interrogating the assumptions of Hindu doctrines, Swapneswari analyses the consequences of child marriage in every day life by raising a series of questions, the first of which talks about the young widow's sexuality. She asks:

how could a child who is widowed as soon as she was married and does not know the world enough is expected to wean herself away from sexual desires (*ulakinbankal*)? Even though those males who seek child marriage do so because they desire virgins as well as due to their fear that if the girls are not married as children then Indiran, Chandran, and Madan will rape them (*kannikaiyai kedupparkalendru*), how can they guard them when their husbands die young? How long a young widow can go on ovulating under her father's vigilance? Should she undergo the curse of killing many kids? *Ayyo* (uh oh), are they [men] incapable of asking such questions? It is a pity. Did all-the-desire (*mukkala unarchikalai*) knowing god make these cruel codes (*vitikalai*)? Since those [males] who believe that the gods or ancestors made marital codes yet they could revise the provision for remarriage that was prevalent in olden days and prohibit it now, likewise why can't they [men] reject the codes for child marriage and prohibit? Do the young widows, who are prevented from remarriage, remain virgins? Not only they kill the babies they conceive, but her own kith and kin collude with them in feticide irrespective of Varna (caste) differences. Does the brahmins tonsuring the widows' head diminish their sex-appeal (*pirarichiyarkka*)? In any case, these brahmin women conceiving babies, and then being married to someone else, lead to shame and curse particularly on the widows when they deliver such babies? At least if they do not tensure the heads of the young widows none would know beyond the close relatives, and their masquerade will survive for sometime in others' eyes. It is by emulating such brahmins that other Varnas have not only rejected widow-remarriage but also have contributed to feticide and widow-homicide.

Having raised the deconstructing questions on Hindu gods, ancestors, and their codes, Swapneswari is not numbed into indifference, given the brahminical patriarchal conditions of

early twentieth century India. Rather she says that those “sisters” (*sakotirikal*) who lament the situation of the young widows should actually work to redress their conditions or at least be a support, instead of cursing those who work against child marriage. However, she writes candidly that more than the married women, some widows are against remarriage because they prefer to have four or five men as their paramour only to be exposed when they conceive babies. Such situations are the result of child marriage and the prevention of widow-remarriage, she reasons.

Apart from examining the problem of child marriage from the point of view of the widow, Swapneswari analyses the conditions of the young girls in marriage. She says that since the wife is too young the husband goes to other women while he imprisons her at home, which also leads to the child-wife’s rancor with in-laws. Furthermore, Swapneswari writes that the family is thrown into chaos because some young wives lose themselves in the sadness of confinement at home, while others deal with it wrongly. There emerges a vicious cycle because those men who are not able to tolerate their wives’ becoming “bad character” consciously (*vivekattinaalundakum tiya gunangkalai*) turn to prostitution, while the wives who can not tolerate such husbands’ indulgences and persecution misuse the liberty to find sexual satisfaction elsewhere (*piraarattuvam*). Eventually, the husband, wife, and the paramour find themselves in police and court cases in shame, and some women use their paramour to even murder their husbands. For all these, Swapneswari observes, child marriage is again responsible. Stating that she has left out many other aspects of this pernicious social institution [child marriage] about which she will write in the future again, she appeals to “sisters” that they should conduct

marriage for their brothers, sisters, and children at the right age or after puberty (*vayatu vanta piragu*), and not child marriage. As usual, she signs off as Sarvajana Sakotiri.<sup>294</sup>

How does Swapneswari's positions compare with pioneering Indian feminists such as Padndita Ramabai? Swapneswari's thoughts on the plight of child-marriage and widowhood in India, in fact, resonate Pandita Ramabai's views on the same. Ramabai relinquishing her brahmin identity and conversion to Christianity is also similar to Swapneswari's criticism of brahmins/Hinduism and alignment with the anti-caste Tamil Buddhists. In fact, Ramabai's understanding of the differences in gender relations between the brahmins and non-brahmins is in agreement with Swapneswari's views about it. This is made clear in Ramabai's observations that

Women of the working classes are better off than their sisters of high castes in India, for in many cases they are obliged to depend upon themselves, and an opportunity for cultivating self-reliance is thus afforded in them by which they largely profit. But high-caste women, unless their families are actually destitute of means to keep them, are shut up within the four walls of their house;

that India is

a country where castes and seclusion of women are regarded as essential tenets of the national creed...;

and that the high-caste woman

has undoubtedly bequeathed the fatal legacy of weakness and dullness to her children. The complete submission of women under the Hindu law has in the lapse of millenniums of years converted them into slavery-loving creatures... and thus desire to depend upon some other nation, and not upon themselves.

These remarks produced such an impact among upper caste men and women then that they were not digestible to even Ramabai's cousin Anandibai Joshee, the first Indian woman to have

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<sup>294</sup> *T* November 19, 1913.



attained the degree of doctor of medicine from the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1886.<sup>295</sup>

However, Ramabai's ambiguities on "high-caste people" and seeing India as "Hindu nation" compel a critical examination of her views. This is further vindicated when Ramabai says, "Among the inhabitants of India, the high-caste people rank as the most intelligent; they have been refined and cultivated race for more than two thousand years. The women of these castes have been and still are kept in ignorance, yet they have inherited from their fathers, to a certain degree, quickness of perception and intelligence." More troublesome are her recommendations for the liberation of the "high-caste women," such as, "Houses should be opened for the young and high-caste child-widows where they can take shelter without the fear of losing their caste, or of being disturbed in their religious belief, and where they may have entire freedom of action as related to caste-rules, such as cooking food..."<sup>296</sup> The high-caste women, such as Ramabai, who had travelled abroad in the nineteenth century and had critically viewed the problems of race and "genocides" against native Americans as much as they appreciated "the freedom of the western Women" could not stand against the problem of caste resolutely. Instead, they find merits in the caste system and aspire for women's liberation within

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<sup>295</sup> Anandibai's caste proclivities are clear through her statements such as: "I will go (to America) as a Hindu [brahmin?], and come back and live among my people as a Hindu." She was also known for her defense of child marriage as the "national custom." She died when she was just twenty-two years of age. Regarding Anandibai's determination to live in America as per the Manu's code and the eventual death due to ill health resulting from orthodoxies about food, Rachel L. Bodley says, "Brave, patriotic words! A resolve which was carried out to the death." See Pundita Ramabai Sarasvati, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (Westport, Connecticut; Hyperion Press, 1976 [1888]), xi, 55, 56, and 59.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, 60 and 63.

it. Arguably, they thus pale in front of anti-caste women such as Swapneswari, who were unequivocal.<sup>297</sup>

Swapneswari and others could come together and address the issues resulting from sexuality, religion, caste, social mores, ancestors, and patriarchy because *The Tamilan* could probably serve as the only medium then that brought women and men together to voice against the problems of gender and caste. Equally important is the self-restraint of its editor Thass. In fact, the latter's establishment of "Ladies Column" in which many women could write on a variety of concerns marks his awareness of the need and ability of women speaking for themselves, even as men wrote on women's condition alongside them. Furthermore, the tidbits about world news that Thass published by collecting from other magazines had direct bearings on what women and men wrote in the weekly, especially on women's issues. For instance, under the title "India and its Young Widows," Thass writes that according to the 1901 census 25,991,936 widows existed in India. Of which those who are less than fifteen years are 391,147; less than ten years are 115,285; less than five years are 19,487. In Madras Presidency less than one year girls are 15; less than two are 23; less than three are 60; for less than five years 617; less than ten years 3, 751; ten to fifteen 18, 078; less than fifteen years 22, 446.<sup>298</sup> Likewise, the appointment of post-women; weather advisory for pregnant women going away from home; scholarship for girls; sati in Calcutta; women doctors; woman hunter; girl hardware specialist in

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<sup>297</sup> For Pandita Ramabai views on African Americans and Native Americans see *Pandita Ramabai's American Encounter: The Peoples of the United States [1889]*, trans., and ed., Meera Kosambi, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

<sup>298</sup> *T* October 23, 1907.

St. Louis; gutsy woman who chased a thief away from ladies train-car and so on only talk about the gender sensitivity and dignity of labor that the weekly carried to its readers.<sup>299</sup>

More importantly, Thass is not only against many marital rituals, but he is also against the markers of marriage such as *taali* (the thread that the husband ties around the neck of a woman to mark her as his wife, while nothing marks him as her husband and his fidelity) as well as against endogamy that go against inter-caste, inter-regional, and inter-continental marriages.<sup>300</sup> For instance, to a letter from one S. Muniswamiyar of Number 74, 39<sup>th</sup> Street, Rangoon [Myanmar] on 11<sup>th</sup> March 1913, enquires about whether *metti* (a ring that is put on the bride and groom during the marriage ceremony, but only the wife wears for the life time) is a Buddhist or of those who have invented themselves into various castes. Thass replies in *The Tamilan* that *metti* is neither Buddhist nor Hindu but of recent foolish invention, and is a useless custom.<sup>301</sup> Likewise, he rejects *taali*, which is considered the sacred symbol of marriage among Hindu women in India in general, among Tamil women in particular, irrespective on their religion (Tamil Christian and Muslim women too wear various types of it). In a piece titled, “Should tying *taali* determine a marriage,” Thass says that he is bemused by some in India claiming that only when one ties a *taali* that marriage is solemnized, and a Hindu should not marry a woman from other religions. Such a requirement, he says, is only to leave the woman who has gone against Hindu codes of marriage or married a Hindu man by a simple register marriage and has a child through him, without any legitimacy and support. Moreover, he says

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<sup>299</sup> *T* February 8, 1911; *T* May 24, 1911; *T* August 14, 1912; *T* April 16, 1913; *T* October 22 and December 24, 1913; *T* March 11, 1914; *T* September 25, 1907; *T* November 30, 1910.

<sup>300</sup> Arguably Thass pioneers such thoughts in the Tamil speaking region, and thus paved the way for other radical feminists, such as Pariyar, to emerge. For the details on Periyar’s thoughts see V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, *Towards A Non-Brahmin Millennium*.

<sup>301</sup> *T* April 23, 1913.

that performing marriage with *taali* and *metti* is also in violation of one of the eight methods of Hindu marriage, Gandharva marriage, ironically, by which a woman and a man can live with each other, irrespective of their nationalities, languages, and castes. Pointedly he says that even when the peoples' character and actions change, for those men who retain second [upper caste] names such as "Iyer, Mudali, Naidu, and Chetty" the codes of marriage don't change. Whereas when an American or a European lives with a Hindu woman and has a child, neither the propriety of such marriage nor the foreigner's support to the woman and child is rejected, and those who promulgate such codes [upper castes] turn a blind eye, Thass says. In other words, he reads that the marriage rituals and codes are to maintain patriarchal caste power and to prevent inter-caste marriage, while marriage between a white man and upper caste woman is condoned. As a critic of caste and gender disparity, Thass rejects marital codes and rituals that not only privilege upper caste Hindu male, but also leave a woman with a child unprotected.<sup>302</sup>

The harrowing customs and codes against widows too come under Thass's scrutiny. Apart from questioning the superstitions that are against brahmin widows that say that one should not encounter them while setting out from one's home, he goes on to examine the gruesomeness of widowhood.<sup>303</sup> Titling his piece "Oh men who lock up the widows," he writes about the discovery of a new born baby left in the toilet of ladies' train-car in Trichy (the present Tiruchirappalli in Tamil Nadu) on Thursday, January 26, 1911. Noting that it was a child born through a paramour, Thass says the reason for such paramour relation, widows delivering babies, and the increase in orphaned or dead babies is the prevention of widow remarriage. Such rules against widow marriage, and the blind Hindu scriptures (*Shastras*) that back them are the

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<sup>302</sup> *T* December 16, 1908.

<sup>303</sup> *T* February 18, 1914.

inventions of fake-gurus [brahmins] in order to extract rice, lentils, and tips by forcing the death anniversary as a ritual obligation on the hapless widows, he explains. Not only such *Shastras* and the practices result from them ruin the gullible, but also make the beneficiaries i.e., such fake-gurus, and their families shameful. Since such inventions devastate not only the kith and kin but the inventors as well (as Swapneswari points out), Thass appeals for promulgating widow remarriage as a law. This, he says, not only will reduce the high percentage of widows, but also help prevent dead children that were born in secrecy. Instead of making widowhood a sore sight (through tonsure and other rituals), Thass insists that remarriage will not only avoid the harassment (*allaladaiyamal*) that women undergo but also restore their happiness.<sup>304</sup>

Thass's criticism of widowhood, widow-rituals, dowry, and child-marriage, and advocacy for women's employment at par with men resonate many of the ideas that his women compatriots campaigned for, including Swapneswari. These pro-women ideas and practices do not just emerge from his evaluation of caste and religious codes and brahminical patriarchy that would absolve his own male-self. Rather, his writings demonstrate his feminist ideas that are fundamentally an auto-critique, i.e., holding the male-world as responsible for all the women's conditions. This is profoundly clear in his piece titled in English, "Who is Responsible for the Fallen Condition of the Women of India? It is the Men themselves."

Using the Tamil adage that even a mouse has two wives during the harvest, Thass begins his essay about polygamy and its implications on women's body and life. He says that in India when a person joins an office work [mostly government jobs then] it is axiomatic that he has to have two wives, one at home and one outside. This legitimacy to indulge in polygamy has crippled the wives into doing things that will always please the man (*ayya*). When the man dies

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<sup>304</sup> *T* February 15, 1911.

for some reason such women are forced in search of other such men in order to survive. This is because they have not been equipped to live through education, and vocational skills. It is transparent, Thass writes, that husbands are responsible for the lack of education, vocational skills, and debilitation of women's body through diseases. However, even if men realize this the Hindu *Shastras* and harem stories (*andappurattu kataikal*) come together to persuade them that women are not entitled to have the self-interest that men have. Here Thass says perceptively, "since the men are responsible for the subjugation of women (*penkalai adimaitanattaal aalakki*) and their degeneration (*seerperavidamal*), they are equally responsible for all other ills in society." For him, thus, gender based oppression is the measure to perceive other problems in Indian society, especially caste.

In this regard citing Japanese and Burmese women's prosperity even after their husbands' death, as a result of the autonomy and vocational knowledge that they have gained in relation to their husbands, Thass points out conversely that Indian men's degradation of women, in turn, degenerate men and the society in general. The prevention of women's education is for him a mark of such debasement. On the other hand, he says those women who have some education mix it with the "classical laziness" (*palaya sombaludan*) i.e., in the rituals of home based husband obeisance, in such a way that their education as well as their conditions are further ruined. Instead, if the women acquire vocational and business skills they will not only avoid fears about their lives, but thrive and gain respect, he insists. Just having basic education is insufficient for Thass, rather it has to be applied to equip one's knowledge (*vidyamuyarchi*). The failure to do so will not only push them in sorrow, but also compel women into oppression of all kinds. In this situation, if some widowed women have wealth, for instance, shiftless men (brahmin priest and others) line up to fleece them and make themselves rich [through widow-

rituals, etc.], while reducing such rich women poor and objects of public scorn. Noting that it would take pages to write about every circumstance in which women are caught among men who have neither skills nor compassion, Thass appeals for intensification of women's education and their equipment in vocational and business skills that would enhance the quality of their lives without depending on men.<sup>305</sup>

Given the understanding of gender issues and progress made in women's rights today, one could say that Thass was not radical enough to articulate on the subject of women, nor could he mobilize women as much as he worked for the Buddhist movement. In fact one can even point his leaning towards the conventions regarding the status of married women and their devotion to the husband's and family's well being.<sup>306</sup> On the other hand, Thass's investigation of brahminical patriarchy and its impact on women's debasement as well as the conditions of Indian women as a metaphor on other ills of the Indian society, reveal that he figured out at least some of the core elements of women's problems in India and its inseparability with the problem of caste. In addition, the polyphony of women writers, their forthright views on child-marriage, dowry, Hindu doctrines, education, and employment that marked the pages of *The Tamilan* only demonstrate the enabling situation that they were in with the weekly, and the unswerving support of its editor, Thass. In sum, one can say with reasonable understanding of the weekly and through the instances discussed above that Thass opens a multifaceted feminist criticism of Indian society that Buddhist, Indian, and Tamil men should take up along with and standing behind wome

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<sup>305</sup> *T* July 3, 1912.

<sup>306</sup> *T* March 25, 1908.

## Conclusion

This chapter analyzed the various ways through which the marginalized, while being aware of the challenges before them, came to organize their efforts to change the conditions that circumscribe their marginality. Though they were aware of the colonial structures and the upper castes' predominance (i.e., through the administrative jobs they were holding and through the Congress, Sabhas, and Public Funds), the most oppressed of the caste system did not hesitate to stake their claims through petitioning their demands. When they were not heeded they did not stop with interrogating the power that be. Significantly, they mobilized resources from among themselves, and their diaspora, to become the agents of their own change. The argument of this chapter, therefore, is that the marginalized (including women) of the caste system were not meek acceptors of their situation. Instead, they attempt to reorganize the South Indian civil society through their representational power to establish non-sectarian organizations of their own as well as by demanding public laws and distribution of resources (such as lands) that would transform the conditions of caste in which they as well as their oppressors i.e., the upper castes, degenerated, even though the latter would have materially benefited by exclusionary methods.



### **Conclusion: Seeds of Emancipated Identity and Movements**

South India has been a fertile ground for many social movements. Particularly, the ways in which people have organized themselves in terms of caste, or against it, have attracted scholarly studies. Though such studies on caste always elicit contested interpretations, the increasing volume of research is only testament to the fact that the caste system and its implications are still in need of better understanding. Despite the fact that the views that unravel the history of caste from the points of view of those who have been most marginalized remain few and far between, yet it assures to be an ever growing field of the present and future. It is in this context, that the present study of the Tamil Buddhist Movement in South India has been undertaken.

An examination of the archive *The Tamilian* archives (1907-1914), this weekly of the Tamil Buddhist Movement reveals at least three discursive modes: oppositional, reconstructional, and representational. These were, it has been argued in this study, not just to contest the colonial and caste power to categorize and marginalize people in terms of oppression such as Lower Castes, Depressed Classes, Sakkiliars, Pallars, and Parayars. More importantly, they were attempts to articulate the self-perception and self-identity of such people beyond the terms of caste. This is, thus, a study of subaltern consciousness at a time when civil society was dominated by three axes of power: a) a brahmin brokered, glibly secular, nationalist movement, b) an emergent non-brahmin upper-caste movement to displace the brahmins, c) the scholarly world (dominated by colonialists, orientalist and nationalists) assumed the inabilities of Dalits (those who were subalternized as untouchables), for instance, to find reasonable means of livelihood while facing the brutalities of caste on a daily basis as well as their taking a stand

against the scholarly world itself by critically knowing their social conditions, speaking about them, and above all writing about them.

In contrast, this historical anthropological study shows that Tamil Buddhists, who were mostly Parayars, clearly demonstrated their *anti-caste imaginare* discursively, and compel us to rethink about the way the marginalized of the caste system are viewed. The worldviews of the Tamil Buddhists show how colonial policies and upper castes mimicking the colonizers carefully constructed the power of caste to subjugate the Parayars and others into servitude. Yet, the same worldviews also indicate that such forces could not really assail their consciousness and articulations of self-identity and their aspirational motivations, i.e., the being and becoming of Tamil Buddhists into actors and agents of their own histories.

Their standpoint of reconstructing Tamil Buddhism against the caste system was not through internalizing the dichotomy and sectarianism of their oppressors, i.e., turning the brahmin versus Parayar, into Parayar versus brahmin, instead, their anti-caste consciousness and Buddhism was inclusive and thus was open to people irrespective of their linguistic and ex-caste status. The participation of people like Laxmi Narasu, Swapneswari, and other non-Tamils and non-Parayars in the Tamil Buddhist movement confirm this observation.<sup>307</sup> This is further corroborated by *The Tamilan* celebrating a brahmin police constable's embrace of Islam, which implies that a corresponding view would have been taken on a brahmin's conversion to Tamil

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<sup>307</sup> Laxmi Narasu was a Buddhist, who was also an associate of Thass. Thass makes special announcements about Narasu's talks on Buddhism at the Sakya Buddhist Association in *The Tamilan* periodically. Narasu was a physics professor and served at Madras Christian College and Panchayapas College in Chennai. His books include *Essence of Buddhism* (1907), *What is Buddhism* (1916), *Religion of the Modern Buddhist* (2002). It is important to mention here that Ambedkar was deeply influenced by Narasu's *Essence of Buddhism* for which he writes a preface in the third edition in 1943.

Buddhism with his/her renunciation of his or her brahminhood. True to his views Thass also wrote against the practice of untouchability against Nadars).<sup>308</sup>

However, despite Thass being the forerunner of many of the ideas of Tamil Buddhism and its organizations, his views need some critical examination beyond what was touched upon in the previous chapters. I take up this task in this brief concluding chapter.

Even though the contexts and implications need to be studied critically, interpreting Thass's thoughts in terms of successes and failures has obvious limitations. Instead, taking a holistic view of Thass shows that he was 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. Thass's primary goal of annihilating caste divisions was inseparably tied up with reorganizing the whole Indian society and was mediated by what he saw around the world. For instance, the notions of nation and nationalism of Europe and Asia as well as Indians' own organizing against the British colonialism in nationalistic terms elicit his views. Particularly, Thass's reading that people in Europe and Asia could overcome social hierarchies by becoming a nation politically that is also embedded in their respective religions influence his counter point. No wonder Thass took up Buddhism as the most viable religion that could open up the possibility of reorganizing Indians, not just lower castes, into a casteless nation.

Was Thass, then, a religious nationalist or linguistic nationalist? Given his writings on Tamil, *Tamilan* and *Tamilar* (Tamil as a person), Tamil Buddhism, *Dravidam* (Tamil), *Dravidan* (Tamils as Dravidians), *Dravidian Buddhists*, *Dravidian Buddhism*<sup>309</sup> and his polemics on Aryan invasions an easy answer could be in the affirmative. The following factors, however, defy such

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<sup>308</sup> *T* October 23, 1907 and *T* September 13, 1911.

<sup>309</sup> W E B Du Bois had also used the phrase "Dravidian Buddhism" to relate and connect South Indians with Africans. See Mullen and Watson *W E B Du Bois on Asia*.

conclusions, thereby making him more ambiguous and hence opening up other interpretive possibilities:

1) Thass's understanding of Buddhism was actually *transnational*. This could be seen in the way he celebrates the Japanese, Burmese, and others being Buddhists, South African whites becoming members in the Sakya Buddhist Association in Durban in South Africa established by the Tamil Buddhist indentured and free labor, and T W Rhys Davis becoming and organizing the Buddhists in UK and Ireland. In fact, Thass becoming a Buddhist in Sri Lanka in 1898 through the baptism of a Sinhala monk, unveils his openness to other "nations" and cultures. However, it is also important to note that Thass was against a ritualized Tamil Buddhism (including worshipping through Buddhist iconography and propitiatory performances) that would encourage orthodoxies and divisions between women and men. Probably, this could also be the reason why he drew away from the Mahabodhi Buddhist Society founder in India, Anagarika Dharmapala, the Sri Lankan Buddhist—who was tutored in the Theosophical Society at Adyar, Tamil Nadu. These reasons cast doubt about reading him as a religious nationalist.

2) For Thass, Sanskrit and Tamil (whose other name is *Dravidam* for him) are sister-languages though linguistically independent. For him they are written formations out of the oral Pali, the vehicle of Buddha's sermons. Thass and many of his associates knowing Pali, Sanskrit, Tamil, and English not only challenge our understanding of the so called Dalits and their relations with languages in India, but also challenge us from making easy associations between brahmins and Sanskrit, that the brahmins are the only authentic claimants of the Sanskrit legacy and none else—a field that remains understudied. One can posit, therefore, Thass's Tamil Buddhism, despite its overt claims about Tamil, Tamils, and Tamil literature, was an effort to construct an identity by politically incorporating religious and linguistic elements that would

enable a person to leave behind caste in order to establish an inclusionary collective and hence, casteless society.<sup>310</sup> It is also because of this commitment for the (re)establishment of a caste-free society Thass views Buddhism as an anti-caste way of life in the subcontinent, but insists on the regionalization of Buddhism in the lingua franca, instead of any language of the past (Pali) or present (English/Hindi).

3) Most importantly, as against caste divisions and oppressions of women and men, Thass welcomes inter-caste, inter-regional, and inter-racial marriages—the Hubli Tamil Buddhists, who are descendants of the Tamil Buddhist Movement, confirm this to us to this day. Thass advocating such inter-mixtures between people and linguistic diversity in India limits the scope to view him as a rabid nationalist.

Nevertheless, Thass's rhetorical postures against the brahmins and upper castes, their participation in the colonial administration and Indian national movement, on the one hand, and his not so radical stand against the colonialists, on the other, could elicit the usual critique against the lower castes—by the upper castes mostly—that they did not demonstrate enough oneness with “Indians.” This study shows that through his particular use of rhetoric, Thass could pose questions that were otherwise not raised, such as, why were the Congress and its funds not used for the marginalized, who gave the power to the brahmins to even dispense the gods of the lower castes, and above all why was the national movement not anti-caste, but only selectively anti-colonial? Such questions went to the heart of the national question as couched in the claims of the national movement including this organizations right to represent the nation and the “national” subject. The answers to the questions led Thass to posit that there was no “Indian” in the national movement that was untainted by caste.

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<sup>310</sup> For this reason he was not a Dravidian nationalist a la Dravida Munnetera Kalagam, the political party in present Tamil Nadu, which was established in 1944.

Given the progress in the modern methods of history and linguistics, Thass could be seen as inadequate performer. His mix of every day experiences of the marginalized, taking literary works from the early first millennium to connect with the present directly, attempting to rewrite history by interrogating the established and mainstream history, blurring the borders of fictions and history, and philosophizing life, soul, right conduct, and humanity may not merit the attention—especially for those who are conservatively inclined—, he could have otherwise gained. On the other hand, one can also argue that they are the voices of the subalterns aimed at transforming theirs and others' life conditions radically that call for careful consideration. If one takes the latter position sympathetically, one still needs to explain why the Tamil Buddhist Movement came to an end with the death of Thass in 1914. Or did it?

This study views that the Buddhist movement of Thass and his associates took two different routes. That there are generations that followed Thass which have continued to hold onto ideas of Tamil Buddhism in various forms and ways, as it is, for instance, in the Hubli Buddhist Association since 1924 to the present. Kolar Gold Fields in Karnataka, Chennai, and Tirupathoor in northern Tamil Nadu have Tamil Buddhists tracing their legacy as “descendants.” More importantly, and this study points that the other route of Tamil Buddhism could actually be seen in the way it has intellectually, if rudimentarily, influenced the two strands of the “non-brahmin movement,” Saivite Self-Respecters as well as the Self-Respect Movement itself.

To be sure, both the Saivite Self-respecters and the Self-Respect Movement never embraced the Buddhist view of the Tamil people's history. In fact, the ideologues of Saivism such as Vedachalam celebrated the defeat of Buddhism and the rise of Saivism and Vaishnavism among the Tamil speakers. However, it is also important to note that Vedachalam's books, such as *Tamilar Matam* (published only in 1941) internalized the Tamil Buddhist ideas such as anti-

caste and anti-brahmin views, and the significance of Tamil as a vehicle of castelessness. The very structure in which Tamilar Matam is organized is in itself to produce a Saivite effect on the basis of Tamil Buddhist arguments. Vedachalam himself confirms this, albeit indirectly, by his derision of Tamil Buddhists in Tamilar Matham, i.e., by admitting to the fact that he had followed them closely (in the sense of living according to the tenets of Buddhism's castelessness and in the sense of having observed the Buddhists trying to live by the same tenets).<sup>311</sup> On the other hand, unlike Thass, 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. Therefore, Vedachalam's *Tamilar* (Tamil as a person) was not caste-free, despite the traces of Tamil Buddhist ideas.

In the case of the Self-Respect Movement of Periyar, which embraced atheism and anti-brahminism as its credo, there was more serious alliance-making with the associates of Thass, such as G. Appaduraiyar, since the mid 1920's. Thus there was a frank exchange of ideas between the two streams of anti-caste politics in South India. However, while Periyar was a towering figure in shaping a rationalist attack on the caste system and brahminism, and did not concede any grounds to the Saivites, such as Vedachalam, what remains unexamined is the connection between Periyar's critique of caste and brahminism and Thass, who preceded him in such activities by more than three decades—going by the archival proofs. Firmly one can say, that many of Periyar's views on idol worship, religious superstitions, gender issues, on the one hand, welcoming science and technologies as a way out of caste, religious obscurantism, and poverty in India, on the other, in fact, palpably resonate with the articulations of Thass. While it

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<sup>311</sup> Vedachalam, *Tamilar Matham*.

will be simplistic to argue that Periyar mimicked Thass, it is important to make these connections to understand the trajectories of the ideas and philosophies of the most marginalized.

Thass's thoughts, including his notions of ethics, castelessness, and humanism, need further critical investigation. This is all the more important in the context of South India, where non-brahmin politics has lent itself to accommodating various castes other than the brahmins, particularly those who stand against social transformation of Dalits. However, the marginalized have faced the challenges of caste, brahmin and non-brahmin, in their own terms. Tamil Buddhism, thus, remains as living history.



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