



NON-BRAHMAN INDIA: DALIT BUDDHIST MOVEMENT IN SOUTH INDIA (IYOTHEE THASS)

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Abstract

Iyotee Thass has been one of influential thinkers of modern India and important personality in Buddhist revival movement in British India. He offers a radical reinterpretation of Buddhism as religion of Dalit-Bahujans. This paper focusing on his main contribution to Buddhist revival movement proposes that his version of Buddhism is a religion capable of uplifting the Dalit-Bahujan in India. This paper also highlights how he dreamed to create a non-Brahman India in which lower sections of Indian society acquire meaningful life.

Key words: Non-Brahman, Thass, South India, Buddhism, Revival Movement, Dalits

Introduction

The nexus between Brahmanism and Colonialism made the former as a hegemonic socio-cultural force in India. But simultaneously two potential enemies also evolved to Brahmanism i.e. Islam and Anti-Brahmanism. While the former's resistance mainly confined to political and it was the later which became big challenge to Brahmanism in colonial and postcolonial India in terms of ideology and political activism. Dalits intellectuals critique of Indian culture and civilisation indeed resulted in a serious cracks to the Brahmanism if not its core ideology at least its explicit practices. This paper is an attempt to capture the life world of a serious dreamer of non-Brahman India Ayothee Thass (1845-1914). He prepared a grand project of non-Brahman India which has three core features: replacement of Brahmanism with Buddhism as a socio-spiritual and religious ethos in India: establishment of dalits as the real or genuine sons of the Indian soil and need for cultural construction of India as a domain of egalitarian society.

This paper is divided into three sections: socio-cultural milieu of Ayothee Thass ideas: the core teaching of Thass by focusing on Buddhism and finally relevance of his ideas to the contemporary times.



Socio-cultural context and ideas of Thass

At the time Thass begun to comprehend the social reality, his thought process was determined by Hindu construction of India, Christian missionary's gospel and practice and need for situation of dalit-subaltern in the socio-cultural domains of India.¹

The process of making of India as cradle of Hindu civilisation initiated by Orientalist discourse and furthered by socio-religious reform movement in India.² According to Nicholas Dricks, colonial construction of India was aimed at creation of consciousness that is incapable of imagining self-rule.³ Obviously Brahmanical literature and religion was prioritised to construct non-material and famine image of India to rationalist and materialist thought of Buddhism. Indeed, colonial masters do not want even in their wildest dreams to have another image of Jesus Christ in India in the form of Buddha. Consequently, in the larger project of producing India Buddhism did not become a favourite topic. In India and outside of India very little is known about Buddha until publication of Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia: The Great Renunciation* published in 1879 in London.⁴

The revival of Buddhism started by a Sri Lankan Buddhist Monk, Angarika Dharmapala who has established Mahabodhi Society in 1892.⁵ This movement was actually inspired by the guidance of a theosophist Henny Olcott who published *The Golden Rules of Buddhism* published in 1887. His construction of Buddhism obviously influenced by American Baptist missionary ethos which looks at religion as a moral dialogue with society. He tried to construct the Buddhism as a rational and moral force which counters the Brahmanical religion. He evolved a critique of Arya Samaj's propagation of Shuddi Movement. He invoked Buddha in the following sentence: 'by oneself evil is done, by oneself one suffers; by oneself evil is left undone, by oneself one is purified. Purity and impurity belong to oneself, no one can purify another'.⁶ (Olcott, p. 165). This statement actually set the agenda for Buddhist revival movement in India which is professed and practiced by non-Brahman intellectual.

Buddha and his ideas were recreated in the light of emancipatory project of dalits. This recreation of Buddhism was conditioned by social egalitarianism, rational humanism and non-Brahman India. I propose that intellectual beginning of this movement founded by Iyothi Thass which culminated into spiritual and political dimension of Buddhism by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's publication of *Buddha and His Dharma*.⁷

¹ S. Bandyopahyay, *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India*, Orient Blackswm, New Delhi, 2004.

² Ronald Inden, *Imagining India*, Indiana University Press, 1990.

³ Nicholas Driks, *Caste of Mind: Colonialism and Making of Modern India*, Princeton University Press, 2001

⁴ Edwin Arnold, *The Light of Asia*, Create Press, London, 2014.

⁵ D.C. Ahir, *Buddhism in India: Rediscovery, Revival and Development*, Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, 2010.

⁶ Henry Olcott, *The life of Buddha and its Lessons*, Kindle, 1912.

⁷ B.R. Ambedkar, *Buddha and His Dharma*, Siddhartha books, New Delhi, 2004.



Ayothee Dasa Pandithar (1845 -1914) a Man in action

Thass is a versatile personality belongs to Parayar caste (an untouchable caste in Tamil Nadu). He was a practitioner of Siddha medicine, a public intellectual and more importantly a non-Brahman crusader. He was not convinced with Hinduism and Christianity as suitable religions for dalits. His quest for respectable identity of dalits in South India led him to move closer to Buddhism. He accompanied Henry Olcott to Sri Lanka in 1898 and embraced Buddhism. Returning from Sri Lanka he established Sakya Buddhist Society in Madras in the same year. From this year onward his journey in Buddhism starts.⁸

The ideas of Thass on Buddhism and its relevance to dalits of India can be captured from two sources: his book entitled *Inder desa Chirata* and several articles published in his journal *Tamilan*. It is impossible for me to present his contribution to Buddhism. As a student of history I would focus on his endeavour to construct the past of dalits by making Buddhism as focal point.

Buddhist centric India in general and South India in particular

Until recently the writings of Thass were not accessible to the public. It was G. Aloysius collected and published the works of Thass in 2002. According to Gail Omvedt 'Pandit Iythy Thass of Tamil Nadu, who first took up Buddhism at the beginning of 20th century and gave a mass base in Tamil Nadu and parts of Burma and South Africa settled by dalit migrant labour'. He made Buddhism as religion of common man who oppose oppressive Brahmanism.

Like Phule, Thass tried to inverse the cultural heritage of India. He developed the concept of Aryan migration and subjection of Tamil Buddhists. He proposed that the word India is originally derived from the concept of a person who conquers five senses. For Thass it was none other than Lord Buddha. He argued that the word India derived from the identity of Buddha. He proposed a radical reinterpretation of Indian history and culture. For his ideas are originally Buddhist Texts and all Gods are great human beings who served people. Brahman gradually absorbed the great vedic literature as their own on account of their victory over the original inhabitants of India who happened to be Buddhists. Thass not only founded his own Buddhist movement; he also identified Dalits with Buddhists by arguing that the Tamil Paraiyas were not only Buddhists, but descendents of the Buddha's own clan, the Sakyas.

He offers radical reinterpretation of India culture by claiming that all the religious festivals observed by Hindus are originally Buddhist festivals. He proposes that Pongal is celebrated of the nirvana of Buddha, Mahasivaratri his renunciation; Deepavali the discovery of oil by Buddhist Monks. He thus proposed that the Brahmanic India was constructed on the foundation laid by Buddhist who are original inhabitants India.⁹

⁸ V. Geeta and S.V. Rajadorai, *Towards Non-Brahman Millennium: From Thass to Periyar*, Popular Prakashan, New Delhi, 2001.

⁹ Gail Omvedt, *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste*, Sage, New Delhi, 2003.



By using historical interpretation, Thass engaged in creating a sense of pride to untouchable communities, moral confidence and evolved the concept of original inhabitants from Buddhist point of view.

Buddhism and emancipation of Dalits

For Pundit Thass and his collaborators such as Laxmi Narasu¹⁰ religion is not about abstract superstition and metaphysical obscurantism, rather a moral code of conduct for smooth functioning of society. For them Brahmanism thrives upon the black magic and ignorance of masses. Building a healthy society and nation, they argued healthy social order is required. Buddhism they identified as solution to the grievances the dalits of India encountered such as denial of natural, civil rights by Brahmanism.

Thass proposed that religion should be a force which facilitates evolution of egalitarian society order. Buddhism he proposed that capable of providing solutions to not only dalits but all non-brahmans. Religion for Thass is nothing a trajectory in which human beings interacts with each other. Brahmanism is system of hierarchies based upon birth which is a class pre-modern element and Buddhism proposes guna should determine the virtues of a person which is essential condition for modern society. Hence the dream of Thass is that India should become Buddhist India in which dalits are at the helm of affairs.¹¹

Conclusion

Intellectual history of dalit movement in colonial and post-colonial India strived for formulations of non-Brahman identities in the form of articulating the 'sons of the soil theory'. The concept of Adi is indeed an all India phenomena in which dalits asserted that they are the original inhabitants of India subjected by Aryans and hence future is belonging to dalits. But Iythy Thass represent a rare case wherein ethnological connection attempted with Buddhans with untouchable communities of Tamin Nadu. This means he tried to forge not simply a spiritual connection but blood connection between dalits and Buddhism.

¹⁰ Laxmi Narasu, *The Essence of Buddhism*, Samyak Prakashan, New Delhi, 2009.

¹¹ Hnamshu Prabha Ray, *Return of Buddha: Ancient Symbols of New Nation*, Rutledge, London, 2013.