CHAPTER-IV

IYOTHEE THASS AND DEPRESSED CLASS INTELLECTUALS’ PRESS

Iyothee Thass, a depressed class member by birth and Buddhist by belief, was a stupendous figure in the emancipation of the Depressed Classes and Women in Tamil Nadu. He initiated socio-cultural awakening which preceded the peculiar rise of the Dravidian Movement in the second decade of the Twentieth Century Tamil Nadu. An ideologue and a cultural crusader, Iyothee Thass and a host of Depressed Class intellectuals of Tamil Nadu initiated a dozen Tamil journals and magazines and expressed novel ideas. Their print and press activities opened a new ground in the subaltern struggle for identity, human dignity, equality, justice and above all, social emancipation. Iyothee Thass and R.Srinivasan started the journals, \textit{Tamizhan} and \textit{Parayan}, respectively heralded the ‘Age of Struggle for Social Justice and Social Acceptance’ in Tamil Nadu. Iyothee Thass also spearheaded a campaign through the press media for the liberation of women from the age old superstitious customs of the Hindu Society. He ran the popular Tamil Weekly, \textit{Tamizhan}, for years. Besides, he published scores of pamphlets and tracts which were widely circulated among Tamils everywhere. The articles and write-up s he contributed to \textit{Tamizhan}, provide an idea of the astounding range of his concerns: caste hegemony, untouchability and issues involved in census which were considered great obstacles for the emancipation of Depressed Classes and Women.
Iyothee Thass was a great thinker and writer. He wrote *Buddhar Adivedam*, *Thiruvalluvar Aaraichi*, *Kural Kadavul Vazhthu*, *Ambikai amman*, *Murugakadavui*, *Harichandran Poigal*, *Indirar Desa Charithiram*, *Yadhartha Yesha Brahmana Vibaranm*, *Gajamukha Moorthy Unmai*, *Kabaleeshwar Vibhuti Aaraichi* and *Tirukural*. All these works were in Tamil and they exposed the myth of Brahmin superiority, irrational Hindu literature and exploitative caste system. ¹

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

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

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

**Depressed Classes**

In the Indian context, the ‘Scheduled Castes’ of today were the ‘Depressed Classes’ of yester years. The term ‘Depressed Classes” began to be used in official circle in the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century. These Depressed Classes shared certain common features of discrimination, degradation and exploitation due to contemptuous treatment they suffered at the hands of caste- Hindus for centuries. ‘Untouchablity’ and ‘segregation’ were the two essential attributes of this stigmatized class. According to B.R. Ambedkar, by the Fourth Century A.D., untouchablity, an abominable social stigma, got institutionalized and the ‘hated people’ were treated as belonging to ‘Fifth Varna’.

The expression of ‘Depressed Classes’ was made up of two words, ‘Depressed’ and ‘Classes’. The former is the adjective form of verb ‘Depressed’, which means to press down and class connotes “One wide group of people who have common way of life

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and have political or economic similarity and equal social status and similar interests.”

Thus, in the ordinary parlance, the Depressed Classes means a group of people pressed down. Untouchables were called Depressed Class. The term, Depressed Classes, was used to describe the lowest in the Hindu caste system, who were suppressed by the caste-Hindus through the ages. Romans had their slaves, Spartans their helots, British their villeins, Americans their Negroes, Germans their Jews and Indians their Depressed people who were considered low classes. They were considered below the Sudras who formed the lowest social order in varna system. In the Puranas, they were called, aaprusyas, avarnas, chandalas. Svapachas, antyajas, jabawans, varishals, antyawasi, antya and bhang.

Journals of Depressed Classes

During this critical period, a dozen Tamil journals were published by the Depressed Class intellectuals in Tamil Nadu. The most notable among these journals were Suriyodayam (Sun Rise) (1869), Panchama (The Outcaste) (1871), Sugirdavasani (1877), Dravidapandian (later Dravidan) (1885) Dravidamitran (1885), Anror Mitran (1886), Mahavikatatoothan (1888), Paraiyan (1893), Illara Ozhukkam (1898), Puloga Vyasan (1900), Druida Kokilam (1907) and Tamizhan (1907) and Tamil Pen (Tamil

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In the columns of these journals, Depressed Class intellectuals like C.Iyothee Thass, A.P.Periyasamy Pulavar, T.C.Narayanaswamy Pillai, T.I.Swamikannu Pulavar, Pandit Munisamy, Rettamalai Srinivasan, John Rathinam, Muthuvira Pavalar, K.Swappaneswari Ammal and several others vehemently criticized casteism, brahmanism, manudharma, kalpa sutra, etc., They also took up their cudgel of attacks against social evils that were rampant in the Hindu Society. They stood for the liberation of women and depressed classes from the tradition-bound Hindu Society.

**British Rule- An Age of Equality**

The British repressive legal measures did not much affect the Depressed Classes. The leaders of Depressed Class considered the necessity of the British Rule for the liberation of their people in all spheres. The British Rule heralded an ‘Age of Equality’ because the people, who were oppressed for centuries due to the practice of untouchability and the rigid caste system, began to feel the breath of freedom. Hence due to the historical necessity, the activities of Depressed Class intellectuals were mostly pro-British. Even B.R. Ambedkar was considered as "the most pro-British Indian". A seven-member Depressed Class jury, editing a supplement for *The Pioneer* on, ‘The Dalit Millennium’, ranked the arrival of Vasco Da Gama as the turning point in Indian history for it was his discovery of the sea route that activated the arrival of the ideas of

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democracy, equality, rule of law. A new vision and a new worldview emerged, which was against the established society.\textsuperscript{12}

The western education was denied to the Depressed Class because of religious sanction. But the availability of the print media helped in awakening the Depressed Classes. The \textit{Tamizhan} weekly of Pandit C. Iyothee Thass was used as an instrument to protest against caste discrimination, to propagate Buddhist ideology and to reclaim the original identity of the Depressed Classes.

\textbf{Advaidananda Sabha}

Born on 20 May 1845, to Kandasamy in Coimbatore District, C. Iyothee Thass’s surname was Kathavarayan and he adopted the name of his teacher, Iyothee Thass. He grew up in the Nilgiris and later settled in Madras. He was a native physician of repute in Siddha medicine.\textsuperscript{13} It is known that one of his grandfathers was a butler in the service of Lord Arlington.\textsuperscript{14} He became a popular leader of people in northern Tamil Nadu. At the age of twenty-five, he established ‘Advaidananda Sabha’. The objectives of the Sabha were two fold. One was the prevention of the proselytizing activities of Christian Missionaries. The second was to find out the emancipatory potentials of the Advaitic tradition in undermining \textit{varna}/caste discriminations.\textsuperscript{15} His link with Hinduism was terminated with his youth age. His involvement with the problems and the situation of the

\textsuperscript{15}. Aloysius, \textit{Religion as Emancipatory Identity. :A Buddhist Movement among the Tamils under Colonialism, op.cit.}, p.55.
Depressed Classes led him to refute the imposed identity of Hinduism. In 1881, he sought to intervene in the census process and demanded that the aboriginal and 'outcaste' communities be recorded as 'original Tamils' and this was followed by a declaration in 1886 that the original inhabitants of this area were not Hindus.\(^{16}\) He urged 'the so-called untouchables to register themselves as casteless Dravidians in the very first census and declare the Tamil Depressed Classes as the true descendents of the anti-Brahmin legacy.\(^{17}\) The Dravidar Kazhagam\(^ {18}\) was founded by Rev. John Ratnam of the Wesleyan Mission as early as 1886. Iyothee Thass was associated with him in bringing out a newsmagazine called the, *Dravida Pandian*.\(^ {19}\)

**Dravida Mahajana Sabha**

The Dravida Mahajana Sabha was formed in 1891 under the leadership of Iyothee Thass at Ooty on 1\(^{st}\) December 1891\(^ {20}\). Ten resolutions were passed, demanding civic rights, educational concessions, removable of certain objectionable rules in jail manual, economic advancement of the Depressed Classes, due share in appointment in government services, including that of village offices.\(^ {21}\) On the conclusion of the first state level Conference, he sent a copy of the resolutions to the then General Secretary, M.Veeraragavachariar of I.N.C.\(^ {22}\) But the Sabha merely received only an

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18. This name was later used by Periyar for his Self-Respect Movement.
19. It later became the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha.
acknowledgement and no action was taken by the I.N.C. Annoyed by this, he remarked that the Congress was only a Bengali Brahmin Congress. His hostility towards the Congress made him anticipate and predict the self fulfilling prophecy that "just like the caste system split to form the 1008 graded castes, the Congress would also split." He became a depressed class activist and led his people in the path of progress. He started the *Oru Paisa Tamizhan* magazine in June 1907 and it was renamed *Tamizhan* on 26 August 1908 and it was published as a weekly continued till his death in 1914.

**Anti-Aryan Discourse**

Iyothee Thass was much connected with the anti-Aryan discourse of the Dalit Movement in Tamil Nadu. His discourse was recognized by a host of scholars. Bergunder viewed that Iyothee Thass belonged to a Paraiyar elite which in the early years of the Raj, achieved a certain degree of social advancement in different ways, be it as soldiers, as employees in medical services, as house-servants to Europeans, as employees in Christian missions, as mine workers etc. The increasing brahmanization of colonial society at the end of the Nineteenth Century, began to restrict such opportunities for social advancement and thereby, counteracted the interests of this small Paraiyar middle class. The Paraiyar Society faced its greatest threats from caste- Hindu forces. The Tamil Buddhist Movement of Iyothee Thass came to flourish and his magazine

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25. Pandian, M.S.S. *op.cit.*, p.104. Iyothee Thass ‘s writings, published in *Oru Paisa Tamizhan* and *Tamizhan*, have been meticulously collected and reprinted by G.Aloysius.


Tamizhan grew from strength to strength. In fact, ethnic identities tended to attain their greatest importance in situations of flux, change, resource competition and threats against boundaries. Ericksen views that “political movements based on cultural identity are strong in societies undergoing modernization, although this does not account for the fact that these movements become nationalist movements”. 28 He adds, "Ethnic symbolism referring to the ancient language, religion, kinship system or way of life is crucial for the maintenance of ethnic identity through periods of change. Generally speaking, social identity becomes most important the moment it seems threatened.” 29

The British Power imparted education and literacy to the Paraiyars. Practising suffocating forms of untouchability, caste-Hindus, especially the Brahmins, thoroughly denied education to the Depressed Class. People followed the professions of their forefathers and the only known system of schooling that was open only to the Brahmins was the Gurukula System. However, the advent of the British brought with it a host of educational institutions, mostly schools. Being from another country, and lacking a caste consciousness, their program of imparting an English education empowered the oppressed. As Eriksen views, "Standardized mass education can therefore be an extremely powerful machine for the creation of abstract identifications. Literacy enables people to create 'authorized' versions of their history, and in view of the 'objective' status granted by written accounts of history in most literate societies, the manipulation, selection or reinterpretation of history for political or other purposes becomes an

29. Ibid., p.68.
important activity in the creation and re-creation of ethnic allegiances”. 30 “The form of cultural reflexivity, engendered by literacy, may be a decisive variable in the ethnic revitalization of indigenous peoples. Since 'culture as a thing' is important in ethno-political symbolism, and since it can most effectively be turned into a thing through writing, we can assume that minorities, confronted with capitalism and the state, stand a better chance of surviving as culture-bearing groups than illiterate groups. Groups which have 'discovered that they have a culture', who have invented and reified their culture, can draw on myths of origin and a wide array of potential boundary-markers that are unavailable to illiterate minorities.” 31

Cultural Renaissance of Depressed Classes

Literacy paved the way for a cultural renaissance among the Paraiahs (Depressed Class). They organized the Paraiyar Mahajana Sabha and the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha and a host of magazines were published. Like the early Nineteenth Century saying of Bishop Wilson, "The number of those who needed to be awakened was far greater than that of those who needed comfort." They accorded importance to the publication of journals and pamphlets (propaganda), seeking clauses 18 and 19 of the Rules and Regulations of the All India Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha. The Clause 18 states that all donations and subscriptions received by the Sabha shall vest in the Executive Committee. The Clause 19 views that the monies thus realized may be devoted to the following among other purposes: 1. to maintain and subsidize journals 2. to publish books and

30 Ibid., p.91.
31 Ibid., p.128.
pamphlet on political, social, scientific, economical and literary subjects. 3. to organize and hold public meetings. 4. to start and maintain libraries and free reading rooms.

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

*Oru Paisa Tamilan*

The very first issue of *Oru Paisa Tamizhan* (19 June 1907) began with an invocation to God, the Government, Tamil, the nation, foreign countries and the English and Dravidian newspapers (including the *Standard, Times, Hindu, Indian Patriot*,

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Uberal, Swadesamitran, Vikatan, Nalindhiya, Andhra Prakasika, Poologa Vyas and Tamil Madhu). In a beautiful couplet, he expressed the emotional and social importance that could be attached to the magazine: “he who knows the worth of the Oru Paisa Tamizhan will value it as one crore (10 million) gold coins”.33 From 26 August 1908, it was published under the name, Tamizhan.

Apart from his preoccupation with the rediscovery of the original Tamil-Buddhist identity, his other concerns were varied and included the problems of the Indians in South Africa,34 caste system among the Catholic Christians35, the problems of agriculture in the Madras Presidency36, appointment of magistrates and district collectors, the working of the Dravida Mahajana Sabha, the absence of representatives in the Legislative Assembly to redress the grievances of the poor37 and so on.

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

Women Liberation

His newspaper was also used to further the cause of women and to expose the sufferings they underwent in Hinduism. He blamed the system of child marriage, the disparity in the treatment meted out to men and women, the taboos of widowhood (like

34. *Tamizhan*, 19 June 1907.
35. Incidentally, Iyothee Thass's son Rajaram Thass was instrumental for the spread of Buddhism among the Tamils in South Africa.
36. *Tamizhan*, 18 January 1910. Iyothee Thass systematically mounted attacks on the casteism prevalent in Christianity. It is unfortunate that the Tamil Christian magazines of the day such as Nallayan and Thiru Idhaya Thoothan liberally acknowledged and perpetrated caste within Christianity.
the compulsory tonsure of hair, white clothes, denial of a pillow to rest her head on), the problems faced by married women, remarriage etc.\textsuperscript{38} In an essay, ‘The desires of Indian men and the difficulties of women’, Iyothee Thass wrote thus: "It is an ideology of present-day Hindus that men can fulfill all their desires, but only women should undergo suffering." He further added thus: "while a man can marry 100 wives even when his wife is alive, a woman cannot remarry even when her husband is dead."\textsuperscript{39} In condemning the plight of women, he knocked out the root of caste-Hindu patriarchy. The highest percentage of his censure was directed at the caste-Hindu newspapers.\textsuperscript{40}

Parayan

Rettainmalai Srinivasan born in 1859 in a village called Kozhialam near Mathurandhagam in Chingleput District, had his education in Coimbatore.\textsuperscript{41} The caste system was so rigidly practised in those days that for fear of disclosing his caste, family and residence, Srinivasan always entered the class after the bell rang and once the class was over, he rushed out of the college immediately so as to avoid enquiry by fellow students. During his student days, he grieved over his inability to move with other students. Later on, when he served as accountant for ten years in European business

\textsuperscript{38}. He also specifically devoted to the problems faced by women. \textit{Ibid.}, dated 16 December 1908; 15 February 1911; 3 July 1912; and 11 December 1912.

\textsuperscript{39}. His ecological concerns probably stem from his expertise as a native physician. He advocated in the early Twentieth Century the need for "growing a tree in every home"-an idea that the State actively began to propagate only recently after decades of unchecked deforestation and mass urbanization.

\textsuperscript{40}. \textit{Tamizhan}, 24 July 1912.

\textsuperscript{41}. Ambedkar Priyan, \textit{Diwan Bahadur Thatha Rettainmalai Srinivasan}, (Tamil), Chennai, 1984, p.4.
houses in Nilgris, his constant thought was about the ways and means of eradicating untouchability.

In 1890, Srinivasan moved to Madras. For three years, he vigorously explored the possibilities of uplifting the Paraiyars and creating a dignity for them like the people of other castes. He undertook an extensive tour of the Madras Presidency visiting Chidambaram, Kumbakonam, Tiruvarur, Tanjore and Trichy the temple cities which stand as symbols of the traditional culture of Tamils. This tour exposed him to the degraded living conditions of the Paraiahs who were also not only subjected to the repressive practice of untouchability but were deprived of even the basic necessities of life like food, water, dress and residence. An inquiry into the efforts of the government to uplift the pariahs revealed that they had been of little effect. Finally, arriving at the conclusion that only self-organisation and articulation of their grievances and demands could bring some relief to these oppressed people, R. Srinivasan started the journal Parayan in 1893.42

It was started fifteen years after the founding of "The Hindu." It was started as a monthly with four pages, for two annas. The first issue saw the printing of 400 copies, which were sold out in just two days. The total cost, including the advertisement, was Rs. 10. It was launched primarily with the aim of stimulating the Depressed Class people in the region to educate and organise themselves. Srinivasan made his intention of starting the magazine, Parayan, very clear as follows, "Like the one who constantly contemplates

about himself and realises himself to become a prophet, the one who does not deny his origin but feels proud about it, speaks the truth without fear or shame and upholds his own freedom, will earn proudly declare himself as such, he cannot achieve his own freedom, but will be subjected to degradation and poverty. It is therefore I publish this journal, crowning it with the name *Parayan*".\(^{43}\)

Started as a monthly, the "*Parayan*" soon became a quarterly, devoted to propaganda in favour of the welfare of the Adi-Dravidas, to expose the acts of oppression of the caste-Hindus and to influence government action. In short, it functioned as an organ of the Parayan Movement, particularly after the formation of the Paraiyan Mahajana Sabha in 1893.\(^{44}\) For seven years from 1893 to 1900, the *Parayan* strove to create an awakening among the Adi-Dravidas in the midst of opposition from the Brahmins and other high caste Hindus. Iyothee Thass wrote a letter to one Seenivasa Ragava Iyengar who was serving as the Inspector General in the Registrar office in Chennai Presidency around 1894. In that letter, he says that among the Depressed Class in Chennai Municipal territory, there were 112 candidates qualified for the post of *dubash* with proficiency in many languages. This helped us to presume that it was the dalit who supported the *Parayan*. This clearly indicates that R. Srinivasan articulated his ideology of self-organisation through the *Parayan* which supported the political resurrection of Depressed Classes during his period. With the intention of going to London to work for the upliftment and emancipation of his own community,

\(^{43}\) Ibid., p.8.
R. Srinivasan went to Bombay. When that was not possible, he did not want to return but proceeded instead to South Africa where he remained for sixteen years. Returning from South Africa once again, he took up the cause of uplifting the depressed classes.

In 1923, R. Srinivasan was nominated as a member of the Madras Legislative Council. His activities in that capacity and afterwards as a representative of Indian aborigines in the First Round Table Conference (1930), signified the emergence of the Depressed Class consciousness and Depressed Class political voice in Tamil Nadu. To begin with, he separated institution of untouchability from the religious issue. He was of the strong opinion that untouchability originated not from the Hindu religion but from the non-acceptance of the Dravidians by the social system of Aryans. When the caste system was introduced by the Aryan conquerors, a section of the conquered refused to accept it. The people who are now variously called Paraiah, Panchama and Adi-Dravida were actually those who refused to accept the caste order and hence subject to various kinds of oppressions, created and lived in villages called the cheri, establishing therein a separate society consisting of a separate temple, tanks, priests, leaders, administrators, vannar, barbers, cremation and burial grounds and practised customs of widow remarriage and divorce. In course of time, they lost their freedom as they came to be dominated by those who accepted the caste hierarchy.