

**Iyothee Tass**  
Hero of Tamil Buddhism



**S. Dhammika**

Essays on Buddhist History & Culture

## Iyothee Tass: Hero of Tamil Buddhism

All nations have their social problems; inequality between the sexes, economic disparity, class divisions, and racial discrimination, in some developed countries a serious drug addiction problem, and so on. But India amongst the great nations has one social problem that is both a major and a seemingly intractable one, and that is the problem of caste. Seventy years after “awaking to light and freedom”, to use Nehru’s memorable words, and despite legislation meant to eradicate it, the indignity of caste continues to blight the lives of millions of Indians. And caste in India bears no comparison to caste in Sri Lanka which was always relatively mild and now has little influence. The Indian type is as brutal and oppressive as can be imagined; it costs lives, it hinders national cohesion and it robs millions of hope. Through the centuries various Hindu saints taught that all humans are equal before God and sometimes even went beyond this to criticize caste, but any impact their efforts had on softening it never lasted long. Most people will be surprised to learn that Indian Sikhs, Muslims and Christians whose faiths strongly advocate human equality, practice caste very much as Hindus do. Only recently have churches in Kerala removed the screens that previously divided low castes from high castes in their congregations.

One Indian who spoke out forcefully and articulately for human equality and against caste was of course the Buddha. Some 15 of his discourses are dedicated to the subject. Several Jataka stories hold caste up to ridicule. Asvaghosa, the great Buddhist poet, wrote a work called the *Vajrasuci* in which he used an array of arguments to condemn cast and uphold human equality. But as Buddhism went into decline in India so faded his ideas on caste. In 1900 the only Buddhists in India were the peoples of the highest regions in the Himalayas; Ladakh, Spiti, Darjeeling and a few regions bordering Burma, and their numbers were insignificant. Today there are eight million and their number are growing fast, still only 0.8% of the population, but a huge number nonetheless. It is one of the largest religious shifts in recent history.

How did this happen in such a socially traditional and conservative country? Indians started to rediscover the Buddha in the 19<sup>th</sup> century mainly as a result of western orientalist scholarship. At first the Buddha was known mainly to educate Indians but by the early 1900s his name and some of his teachings had filtered down to the average person. As people became familiar with the Buddha’s ideas on caste it attracted particular attention, especially among low castes and untouchables groups.

One such person was Iyothee Thass. Born in 1845 just outside Chennai in Tamil Nadu into an outcaste family, Thass had managed to become literate enough to study and later become proficient in Siddha medicine. He had a voracious appetite for learning, read widely and thought deeply. Knowing from the inside the oppression and indignities that Dalits (low castes and outcasts) were subjected to Thass became an articulate opponent of the caste system. But he was not content to just sit back and criticize it, he took bold steps to do something about it. He founded several schools and vocational training institutes to help outcastes find work beyond the humiliating jobs that were traditionally allotted to them, and he lectures widely. In 1891, he established the *Dravida Mahajana Sabha*, and in December of that year organised the first conference on behalf of the Sabha at the end of which ten resolutions were passed including the one demanding the outlawing of referring to anyone a Pariah, and others creating separate schools, providing scholarships for matriculation education for untouchable children, providing employment for educated untouchables, and representation for untouchables in District Boards and Municipal Boards.

For years Thass had been studying Buddhism and eventually came to the conclusion that it would provide Dalits with not just an inspiring role model but an Indian role model, and a philosophy of life that specifically addressed question of caste. Studying Tamil history, he was amazed to discover that Buddhism had had a long and rich history in amongst the Tamil people. With such facts he constructed an alternative history with the help of Tamil literature and folk traditions. He claimed that Dalits (untouchables) were actually Tamil Buddhists who had caste imposed upon them because they opposed the orthodox practices exemplified by the Hindu brahmins. This theory is unhistorical but at the time it gave millions of Tamil

Dalits a sense of identity and purpose and a much needed pride in themselves. Finally, Thass began calling upon Dalits to return to what he believed was their original religion, Buddhism.

In 1898, he and his friend and helper Krishnasamy journeyed to Sri Lanka and took the Three Refuges, thereby becoming Buddhists. *The Theosophist*, the monthly journal of the Theosophical Society based in Adyar, Chennai, wrote of this event: "Pundit C. Iyothee Thass, he was one of the two gentlemen whom the Colonel [Olcott] took to Ceylon in 1898 as representative of the Panchama [outcaste] Community of Madras. Both of them were admitted into Buddhist fold by the High Priest Sumangala, and thus began a new era in the history of the unfortunate Panchamas of Southern India." Once again, the Theosophical Society, Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala and Henry Steel Olcott had a hand in promoting Buddhism. Shortly after embracing Buddhism, Thass founded The Sakya Buddhist Society at Royapettah, Chennai. In 1907, he started his journal *Oru Paisa Tamilan* as an organ of this organisation.

That Iyothee Thass' ideas had struck a chord is evidenced by the fact that soon after its founding the Sakya Buddhist Society had branches in several places in what was then Madras Presidency, but also in Natal in South Africa, in Rangoon, in Singapore and in Sri Lanka where many Dalits had migrated as labourers. Other branches of the society were established in Champion Reefs, Marikuppam, and the Kolar Gold Fields near Bangalore where Dalits worked in the mines.

Sakya Buddhist Society held a regular program of talks on Buddhism called *Buddha Dhamma Pirasangam* (Explaining the Buddha's Dhamma) during evenings. Also, specifically Buddhist rituals for births, funerals and marriages were created and various celebrations were held to which many thousands of people were attracted. All these and other news was reported in the Society's paper, *Tamilan*. In 1911 the Society got Dalits officially categorized as 'Buddhists' in that year's Mysore decennial census report. This gave Dalits a presence which made it less easy to just ignore them, which is what usually happened. It meant they and their plight had to be taken into account.

As far as his political views were concerned, Iyothee Thass was not just unique but controversial. He questioned the Indian National Congress' claim to be the sole representative of all Indians. Once he said to Congress leaders: "You claim to represent us but you will not even eat together with us." He questioned that Swaraj or Home Rule would bring any change for the better in the lives of Dalits. He stressed social transformation rather than political transformation. While most Indians saw the British as oppressors, he and most other Dalits, thoroughly oppressed by their fellow Indians, saw them as sympathetic to and helpful towards their aspirations. Gandhi's Indian National Congress believed that the British sympathy for Dalits was nothing more than a 'divide and rule' strategy. When Thass was told this by Gandhi he retorted: "We Indians are already divided, by you and your religion."

When Iyothee Thass died on the 5<sup>th</sup> May 1914, worn out by work and worry, the movement he had founded was going strong. Unfortunately, since then it has faded a great deal, particularly its Buddhist aspect. Had Thass converted to Christianity or Islam assistance of various types would have been quickly forthcoming from Christians and Muslims both within India and beyond. The sad truth is that traditional Buddhists took little interest in the promotion of their religion beyond their own countries. Other than a few monks from Sri Lanka no others volunteered to help, no financial aid was forthcoming, and the situation is no different even now. Today in India, every now and then large, well-publicised conversion events are organized during which sometimes thousands of Dalits convert to Buddhism en masse. But after all the festivities and the speeches they all return to their homes knowing no more about the Dhamma than they did before, and there are usually no monks for them to approach to find out. The boat of the Dhamma continues to drift forward but without rowers or rudder. None of this detracts from Iyothee Thass greatness. He remains one of the Buddha's modern day heroes.