CASTE-LESS COMMUNITY:

IYOTHEE THASS (1845-1914) AND TAMIL BUDDHISM

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IN

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled **Caste-less Community: Iyothee Thass (1845-1914) and Tamil Buddhism** submitted by **Dickens Leonard M.** Reg. No. **11HCPH 02** in partial fulfilment of the requirements for award of Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature is a bonafide work carried out by him under my supervision and guidance.

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4. CL 828	Reading Indian Folklore	2	PASS
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I, **Dickens Leonard M.** (Regd. No. 11HCPH02), hereby declare that this thesis titled "**Caste-less Community: Iyothee Thass (1845-1914) and Tamil Buddhism**" submitted by me under the guidance and supervision of Professor M.T. Ansari is a bonafide research work which is also free from plagiarism. I also declare that it has not been submitted in part or in full to this University or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I hereby agree that my thesis can be deposited in Shodhganga/ INFLIBNET.

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C O N T E N T S

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ABBREVIATIONS

IDS   –   *Indhirar Dhesa Sarithiram* (*History of Indhirar Country*)

MSO   –   Madras School of Orientalism

OBC   –   Other Backward Communities

PRDS –   *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha*

SC/ST –   Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes

SIBA   –   South Indian Buddhist Association

T   –   *Tamizhan* (Tamilian)

Figure 1. *Oru Paisa Tamizhan* - 13.

INTRODUCTION

> To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time (James Baldwin, 1961:205).

This statement from the African-American writer James Alfred Baldwin suitably parallels, and well applies, to a "relatively conscious" Dalit (ex-untouchable) in an alienating caste-context anywhere in the world, particularly, in India. This thesis attempts to explore Dalit's (dis)engagement with caste and the Hindu religion, and their experiments with caste-less[1] textuality. This research foregrounds the works of Dalit intellectuals, who are hitherto understudied such as Iyothee Thass, and it largely focuses on the writings, thought, and history of Tamil Buddhism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

As I was writing my core chapters – nearing the conclusion of my PhD period – Rohith Vemula committed "suicide" on 17th January 2016.[2] His death sparked off

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[1] Caste-lessness, though in present debates, have come to mean "merit" and "anti-reservation," largely by a section of dominant castes and elites in contemporary India, who specifically call for caste-blind enumerations (Deshpande, 2013). This thesis does not suggest such an argument, but turns it around to suggest that caste-lessness is an ethico-political principle which was mooted by the most oppressed of caste to suggest an alternative for everyone.

[2] Rohith Chakravarthy Vemula, a fellow scholar and friend at University of Hyderabad, before committing "suicide," wrote in his departing note on 17th January 2016, that for some birth itself is a curse; and his birth is a fatal accident. Despaired after struggling against social boycott at the university, Rohith's death sparked off wide-spread protests across the world, where dalit politics converged along with students' and social movements against caste-discrimination in higher educational spaces in the country. His death was considered as an institutional murder and a case under prevention of atrocities against SC/ST act was also filed in Hyderabad high court. However, Rohith's desire to be writer was fulfilled only in his death. And all he got to write was this "last letter for the first time" (Vemula, 2016). Rohith Vemula – an aspiring writer and academic – son of a single Dalit mother (divorcee) became an iconic catalyst for a movement against caste-discrimination in contemporary India. However, Rohith and his family are now denounced as non-Dalits, and even in his death, his birth is clarified through enumerative categories to apprehend his life, and others (Mondal, 2016; Henry, 2016; *The News Minute*, 2017).

massive students' agitation and widespread Dalit mobilization across the globe as he

became an anti-caste icon across the subcontinent. A new meaning to student struggles

was only added after Rohith's "suicide" note was circulated far and wide.[3] Ever since,

the institutes of higher education have increasingly become sites of anti-caste

struggles.[4] Particularly Hyderabad – home to an assertive anti-caste student politics

since 1990s – in South India has become a battle ground for such an incessant fight.

ROHITH'S SHADOWS

Rohith Vemula wrote in his *un*-departing note that for some birth is a curse; and his

birth is a fatal accident (Vemula, 2016). Is there any birth that is not a fatal accident,

one wonders? One could also extend whether the birth of nation, the birth of what is to

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[3] In the eye of the storm was Rohith's haunting yet philosophical "suicide" note –

> … I loved Science, Stars, Nature, but then I loved people without knowing that people have long since divorced from nature. Our feelings are second handed. Our love is constructed. Our beliefs colored. Our originality valid through artificial art. It has become truly difficult to love without getting hurt. The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of star dust. In every field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living.
> I am writing this kind of letter for the first time. My first time of a final letter. Forgive me if I fail to make sense. My birth is my fatal accident. I can never recover from my childhood loneliness. The unappreciated child from my past …

He went on further to state, in a Christ-like manner that –

> … No one has instigated me, whether by their acts or by their words to this act. This is my decision and I am the only one responsible for this. Do not trouble my friends and enemies on this after I am gone (Vemula, 2016).

While his death was considered as a sacrifice, it was also widely perceived that his aspiration was humiliated, rejected, and reduced to death. The Dalit presence is then perhaps ontologically never human enough, as many a time, as increasingly cows are holier than a Dalit and a Muslim in contemporary India. And, the Dalit presence in academic spaces haunts the privileged and the dominant as they are made to belong to a different time, who however occupy – non-meritoriously – the present, "modern," spaces that are largely populated and designed by/for the "upper" castes. Though rejected over dead-meat; they haunt in their presence as socially dead beings. They are subjected as incompatible beings in life but become powerful icons in their deaths. They, perhaps, are ghost-presences. However, Rohith rejected this rejection, willfully, through his death.

[4] Though there have been many anti-caste student movements across the country, ever since 1960s, they had largely worked within a vernacular or regional space. The post-Rohith movement, and the events that followed, brought to light the newer political energy of an anti-caste consciousness and an emergent mobilization not only within an English-speaking audience, but also across vernacular, regional, and global spaces as well. Dalits across the globe agitated, mobilized themselves, and brought out protest statements. Academics, writers, journalists, workers, street- hawkers, and students together became a part of this uprising. Many public personalities came out openly about their Dalit identity. It became a social movement across the country, starting from a University in South India. Perhaps for the first time in India, an agitation in a University became a rallying point for a global resistance against caste. And, Rohith became an iconic presence in any protest against caste-discrimination thereafter.

be human, who is an untouchable – are they not accidents? If they are indeed just accidents, why is the value of a person never treated as a glorious being made out of star dust? Why s/he is reduced to an identity, to a number, to a vote, to a thing? Desiring to be a writer of science, Rohith became a ghost-writer of sorts in his eventual death.

Rohith's gesture against violence – his sacrifice, his gift of life and death[5] – is perhaps against caste that "things" human beings to their immediate identity and nearest possibility. A question of values against the notion of "what it is to be" was raised. Did Rohith's death signify the death of a community? Or did it signify the political valency of the community of deaths? Is death, an offering to the community, a gift? What about the death – a living social death – before the physical death, which is inscribed in the corporal experience of an untouchable Dalit-ness? Is death a gift then, for a community to come? Did Rohith's death embody the lack or a failure of an anti-caste community, located and positioned from an outcaste ontology, especially in modern spaces in this country?

Can (caste) death be one's own? As births are never treated as fatal accidents; deaths too are never incidents of choice. Perhaps, there is nothing in caste that transcends one's death from birth. Defiantly, Rohith's departing note is about the life of death as an incident of choice and a lack-of-choice. It is a gift – that communities' give and take – where death defies and refutes one's own birth and becomes an open call for a *movement* to come. This is one of the primary concepts that a hermeneutic of community explores about *anti/post*-caste possibilities.

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[5] Sasheej Hegde's "The Gift of a Life and Death" (2016) purports that Rohith's life and death demands an answer from all of "us." Drawing from the works of Marcel Mauss, Jacques Derrida, and Olly Pyythinen, he understands Rohith's life and death as a "gift." However, he states that this gift is challenged by an inherent sociality as well as transformative radicalism of thought and action. Hence, he forcefully argues that a pervasive sociality can constrict the idea of "gift." He asks can one transcend the limits of the frames of caste-sociality in a lived sense, as a free-standing "gift."

When not given a proper burial, where his body was taken away and burnt on a pyre in haste, his kith and kin decided to have a Buddhist death ceremony in an Ambedkarite fashion with his ashes. On his 27th birth anniversary (30th January 2016), around eight thousand people clad in white walked in silence from *Deeksha Bhoomi* to the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* headquarters at Nagpur in protest. Besides, Ambedkarite Buddhists received students throughout the train stations from Hyderabad to Delhi, when students travelled to Delhi to seek justice for Rohith. And on the 125th birth anniversary of Babasaheb Dr. B.R. Ambedkar – on 14th April 2016, Rohith's mother and brother – Ms. Radhika and Mr. Raja Vemula converted to Buddhism in Bombay, thereby inaugurating another debate on conversion and caste. Perhaps death raises the question of community, sociality, and fraternity much more intimately for the Dalit community, as a social death precedes an eventual death.

Rohith's life and death seem to suggest that Dalit-ness is accepted and romanticized only if it remains socially-dead. It threatens, if it rejects passivity, exits out of social death, and exhibits a will to life. He had signed-off his death desiring *movement* – "from shadows to stars." His death can be evaluated as a gift of death towards life. It is a call for a future; perhaps, for a coming community. This prophetic call could treat someone as "a glorious being made of star dust." This clarion call is against caste that "things" human beings to their immediate identity and nearest possibility. His martyrdom, perhaps, raised the value of what it is "to become." It is a call for a community that values how one dies, rather than what is one's birth. It is a call towards a community of death, not birth – which is an exciting freedom from social-death.

However, this thesis is not about Rohith Vemula and his life, or perhaps, it is not directly about those textualities of caste that made him a phenomenon today. The

Dalit subject is often objectified by an existential broken-ness and is a subject of venomous prejudice. Pain, trauma, and scars are its markers though many have intervened to change this phenomenon. However, it is generally understood that this broken image is deprived of any positive memory. To move beyond this frozen image, this thesis foregrounds and studies textualities of caste-lessness that Dalits had continuously produced in history against various hermeneutics of caste – be it colonial, missionary or nationalist. In this attempt, it engages and critically conceptualizes a theory of caste-less community that is generated from Dalit experience during the colonial period which exposes inscriptions of caste, while creatively evaluating "exscriptions" of anti-caste community.[6] Subaltern thinkers, such as Iyothee Thass, creatively retrieve a civilizational memory through Buddhism from a vernacular resource. This act of exscription, perhaps, is a specific kind of modernity that is both "closed and open-ended, fragile and ecologically just."[7]

THE THESIS (*IN THE LIGHT* OF SHADOWS)

"Indian History" generally informs that the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth century (1870-1930) is a tumultuous period of nationalist uprising, religious reform and political modification (Seal, 1971; Chandra, 1972; Guha, 1988; Prakash, 1990). That it attempted to transform the subjects of provincial territories into patriotic citizen-

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[6] French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy introduces the term "exscription" to refer "becoming-other-than-itself" whereby writing and reading exposes oneself to the other – to "exscription" (Nancy, 1994:18-19). He states – "Writing, and reading, is to be exposed, to expose oneself … to 'exscription.' The exscribed is … that opening into itself, of writing to itself, to its own inscription as the infinite discharge of meaning" (Nancy, 1990:64). He differs it from inscription thus – "the being of existence can be presented … when exscribed … where writing at every moment discharges itself, unburdens itself" (64). Moreover, it "distances signification and which itself would be communication … they communicate as complete what was only written in pieces and by chance" (65). It is an exscription of finitude, Nancy argues. This is could be applied to Iyothee Thass' writings against caste and Brahminism, especially, his creative exploration of a caste-less community in Tamil Buddhism – as a writing that exposes, discharges, and unburdens itself to the other of caste.

[7] In an email conversation with Prof. P. Thirumal. He states that Thass' Tamil Buddhism is about the "un-thought" of caste, and this "un-thought" is radicalized, articulated and penetrated through a vernacular cultural resource by subaltern thinkers. One could, in fact, grant this act of exscription a specific kind of modernity that is both closed and open-ended, fragile and ecologically just. He also terms this exscription as "relative description of the nation vis-à-vis the singular description.

subjects of an independent nation-state on the interstices of secularism, modernity and democracy, is a known popular narrative (Chatterjee, 1986, 1993, 2004; Bhargava, 1998; Sarkar, 1998; Kaviraj, 1992). However, the organized mobilization of the Dalit-Subaltern communities – where caste and religion inter-played as significant identity markers for emancipation, assertion, and opposition offering diverse ways to conceptualize colonial public sphere and civil society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century – gets recent academic interest (Zelliot, 1992; Omvedt, 1994; Bandhyopadhyay, 1997; Dube, 1998; Aloysius, 1998; Prashad, 2002; Menon, 2006; Narayan, 2006; Rao, 2009; Wakankar, 2010; Basu, 2011; Rawat, 2013; Viswanath, 2014; Mohan, 2015; Rawat and Satyanarayana, 2016).

This thesis explores one of the earliest "Dalit" articulations in South India, during the colonial period and extends the studies on anti-caste intellectual thought by foregrounding the Tamil cosmopolis. It attempts to understand how the most oppressed by caste, autonomously create a caste-less/free textuality through religion in the early twentieth century. This extends but departs critically from prominent works on caste and religion in South Asia that have come to study them variously as essentialist and constructionist. Pandit Iyothee Thass' texts on Tamil Buddhism is studied as a *movement* that is geared through journalistic-print activity – in the context of Dalit migration to presidential cities, industrial towns, railway quarters and military cantonments, as well as, the indentured labour migration to countries such as Burma, South Africa, Ceylon, and south-east Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The work suggests that an anti-caste "communitas" (Blanchot, 1988; Nancy, 1991; Esposito, 2009) was possible as Dalits produced a creative "hermeneutic" (Ricoeur, 2005) that is based on (lived) "experience" (Guru and Sarukkai, 2012), which

competed against powerful hermeneutics of caste "immunitas" (Esposito, 2009) in the colonial period. Even under displacement and disembodiment, the Dalits imagined a home "in-place" and "in-time," which constitutes anti-caste values. Hence Thass' texts were conceptualized as foregrounding a caste-less community in writing. The thesis asks is Dalit communitas, with caste-lessness at its core, impossible and unavowable as an "originary sociality" (Nancy, 1991).

Not many have studied how Dalits evaluate caste as a text, and in turn produce textualities of anti-caste in the vernacular; and Dalits do produce caste-less textualities until today, not only as a veritable battle about the past. Research on these texts could be treated as an engagement with comparative ethics. Recent works on Dalits and religion are largely useful to conceptualize such an anti-caste ethics (Wakankar, 2010; Ayyathurai, 2011; Guru, 2012; Mohan, 2015; and Kumar, 2015). This is fashioning a genealogy of thought which integrates experience, understands social inheritances, and anchors the living present with a conscious community of sense and memory, while tracking an alternative dissenting lineage.

Study on this archive of materials – historical, cultural, religious, and critical theory – suggests a positional critique of caste and belonging that is embodied through birth. And the Subaltern (Dalit) thought uses "death" as a communitarian idea to reconfigure notions of space and time that is open, creative, and resistant, thus paving an anti-caste way to think about ethics. This has relevance, as critique, for the rampant violence and humiliation that oppressively institutionalise the body and mind, today.

Thus, all "looking-backs" (Wakankar, 2010) – the act of engaging with the past – are insightfully political and prominently about the present. It enables one to visualize a "will" as coming-present, ably reinvigorated by the past. Iyothee Thass' life – his

publications, writings, leadership, and activism – as a discourse needs a theoretical

vantage point from which one can inter-relate him with the questions of the

contemporary. This research argues that one cannot conceive of an Ambedkarite or a

Periyarite anti-caste millennium without looking back at figures, like Iyothee Thass

who worked on a vernacular religion, from every region across the subcontinent. It

suggests a much longer history of anti-caste struggles and thought exist. Thus, on these

foundations and shoulders, later movements and intellectuals sprang forth.

The late 1990s and early 2000s, just like the earlier century (1890s-1910s) in

which Thass worked, were politically vibrant times. The Tamil intellectual sphere was

churned and changed quite drastically by the "little magazine" movements along with

the Dalit socio-political emergence across the subcontinent.[8] This thesis endeavours to

re-look into this historical context, and study the works that made these writers and

intellectuals rediscover Thass. It endeavours to capture this trajectory that produced

Thass as an epistemological discourse. This thesis, in this attempt, experiments to place

and compare Dalit thought and religion with that of *communitas*.[9]

An ethical-ontological register that "gifts" is the basic underlying principle

behind communitas as a concept. The Dalit positionality on religion, in Thass,

foregrounds caste-lessness and chooses – exscribes – Buddhism as its register in

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[8] It is generally understood that Dalit writing – as a political act – emerged during the late 1990s, particularly during the hundredth birth anniversary of Babasaheb Ambedkar, the unparalleled leader and icon of the oppressed across post-Independent India. Dalit politics too emerged, particularly in the Tamil political sphere with the rise of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* (*Liberation Panthers*) and *Puthiya Tamizhagam* (*New Tamil Nadu*). This was ably supported by the rise of "little magazines" in the publication field especially with the circulation of *Dalit Murasu* and *Nirapirakai*. This promoted writers, particularly Dalits, to express and study anti-caste history and thought that had politically a Dalit foregrounding. Many writers explored Dalit poetry, prose, intellectual thought and history, where figures like Iyothee Thass, Rettaimalai Srinivasan, Gurusamy, M.C. Rajah, N. Sivaraj, Meenambal, Appaduraiyar and etc., were rediscovered.

[9] *Communitas*, a Latin loan word, has been theorized in Cultural Anthropology and Social Sciences to refer to an unstructured community where people are equal, or to the "spirit" of community. And the concept has been theorized extensively within the philosophical discourse on community. I critically use the concept in the thesis to study Thass' engagement with Buddhism, and elaborately discuss communitas in the second chapter.

writing and thought, and as a community to come. Thass' use of Tamil Buddhism paves a viable anti-caste critique within the vernacular cosmopolitan – as community experience and experiential community. Dalits used writing and reading as acts for a caste-less community to come which had resources in the past. Iyothee Thass' and his contemporaries' efforts in the long nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, hence, need a historical re-look.

The thesis demonstrates that the Dalit intellectuals in the early twentieth century held counter views on caste and religion that were relative and transformatory exscriptions against singular inscription. Thass, through his Buddhist writings, reworks a genealogy of loss but recovers it through an anti-caste civilizational memory in Tamil Buddhism – a civilizational claim against caste that envisions a *post-caste* imaginary as *pre-caste* genealogy. The radical anti-caste movement claims religion as a civilizational exscription over a coming community through a radical rereading of history as pedagogy.

One can argue that the Subaltern thought in India, which belongs to the anti-caste tradition, uses interpretation as a tool to reconfigure notions of space and time that is open, creative, and resistant. They inaugurate and constitute a millennial anti-caste communitas, of a kind, as creative opposition and history against caste. This has relevance, as resistance, for the rampant violence and humiliation that oppressively institutionalize the body and mind today in India.

WHO IS IYOTHEE THASS?

The Tamil intellectual Pandit Iyothee Thass[10] (1845-1914) ran the magazine *Tamizhan* (1907-1914), which revived interest on Buddhism as an anti-caste religion. A man of anti-caste ideas, he was a major leader, intellectual and activist whose life, work, and legacy have regrettably remained neglected by historians until recently.[11] In many ways, a precursor to towering anti-caste figures like Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (1879-1973) and Babasaheb Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), Thass was the first to develop an anti-caste narrative by espousing and writing on Buddhism. He was a practitioner of *Siddha* medicine, who during the 1881 British-India census, appealed that the *panchamas* (*ex-untouchables*) were not Hindus and that they must be recorded as original Tamils – *Adi Tamizhar* (Aloysius, 2015:69). He used Tamil literary resources and palm-scripts, so as to field anti-caste, Tamil literature, and folk lore based explanations on Buddhism.

Iyothee Thass was born Kathavarayan in the year 1845. And as he admired his teacher Tondai Mandalam Vallakalatinagar Vee. Iyothithaasa Kavirayar Pandithar, he changed his name to Pandit C. Iyothee Thass, coincidently, just like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar did five decades later.[12] Thass ran the Tamil journal *Oru Paisa Tamizhan* (later

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[10] Iyotheethassa Pandithar (1845-1914) was born a Dalit from the Parayar community, nevertheless, he contested the category Paraya throughout his life. He floated alternative, open identities such as *poorva Bouddhar* (*Ancient Buddhist*), *Jaadhi pedha matra Tamizhar/Dravidar* (*Caste-less Tamils/Dravidians*), and *Tamil Bouddhar* (*Tamil Buddhist*). Iyotheethaasa Pandithar (*Pandit*) is also termed as Iyothee Thass and Thass in this thesis.

[11] Likewise, many such figures seem to have worked similar to Thass during the same period in the vernacular regions. Narayana Guru (1856-1928) from Kerala, Bhima Bhoi (1850-1995) in Orissa, Poikkayil Yohannan (1878-1939) in Kerala, and a little earlier Jyotirao Phule (1827-1920) created a hermeneutic of anti-caste community in writing.

[12] It is important to note that there is a similar realm at which anti-caste intellectuals treat re-naming as a political act. Bhimarao Ramji Ambavadekar changed his name to B.R. Ambedkar in memory of his teacher. And later, in "Away from the Hindus," Ambedkar explores a very interesting search and theory of names in the wake of the resolution passed in the 1936 Mahar conference in Bombay, where the community decided to abandon Hinduism and convert to some other religion. Ambedkar argues that "The name matters and matters a great deal. For, the name can make a revolution in the status of the Untouchables. But the name must be the name of a community outside Hinduism and beyond its power of spoliation and degradation. Such name can be the property of the Untouchable only if they undergo

Tamizhan or *The Tamilian*) from June 19, 1907 to April 29, 1914 – incidentally the year Mohandas Gandhi returned to India from South Africa and Dr. Ambedkar was in the middle of his research in Columbia University, New York. Compared to other radical, anti-race, African-American magazines such as *The Chicago Defender* during the same time, *Tamizhan* ran similar radical contents against caste, health columns, local and international news; and it also had a wide reach among the marginalized (Ayyathurai, 2011:21-22).

Thass pioneered the Buddhist movement in the cities where Dalits migrated as coolies, such as Kolar Gold Field, Bangalore, Rangoon and Durban. He devoted time to start separate *vihars*, worship practices, festivals, libraries, schools, burial places, and marriage customs. These were done to reconstruct Dalit history through a Buddhist framework in the vernacular. Not only did he work for the religious identity of the Dalits, but also for their political, social, and economic needs too. This figure, when placed within the Dalit discourse, goes beyond both the "*desi*" and the "derivative" national discourse (Guru, 2011:36-42). Though Thass' claims are based on a negative and oppositional language, he transcends into a normative form of thinking.[13] That is, Thass does not construct an anti-Brahmin discourse as a negative and oppositional stance alone. He not only talks about the Brahmin as an "other" to imagine the self, but transcends it to create an ethical imaginary in Tamil Buddhism. Thass treats it is an

religious conversion. A conversion within Hinduism is a clandestine conversion which can be of no avail" (Ambedkar, 2014:420).

[13] Gopal Guru's "The Idea of India" (2011) categorizes the dominant nationalist thoughts in India as Derivative and Desi. He understands that Chatterjee's work on nationalist thought is "derivative" in the sense that it fashions itself on the modular form of nationalism as developed in the west, as it is quite selective about its borrowings, at least for political reasons. He argues that the derivative as a methodological language is necessary but not sufficiently capacious so as to unfold the differential nature of nationalist thought in India. Guru, in this essay, presents a sharp contrast to the "derivative" and "desi" discourses governing nationalist thought and the "idea of India" by studying the Dalit discourse in India. He demonstrates that the Dalit discourse – especially, *Babasaheb* Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's work and life – goes "beyond" the two in offering an imagination that is based on a "negative" language which however transcends into a normative form of thinking. One can see such similar creative impulses in much earlier anti-caste works, such as Iyothee Thass' writings on religion, particularly Tamil Buddhism.

embodied cultural legacy for the oppressed to practice anti-caste values through his writings.

Hence Thass' agenda and his search for an alternative was characterized by an anxiety to challenge yet transcend the given situation as an indispensable condition for Subaltern emancipation. Political and cultural idealism – which erupted within his astounding knowledge of history and culture – characterize his writings (Aloysius, 2010:241). This was made possible not only by the historical context under which the Tamil Dalits emerged as a community during the early twentieth century, but also because the emergent public sphere proved to be a backbone to Thass' writings on Buddhism. It is instructive to discuss the emergence of the Dalits as an anti-caste public sphere in the early twentieth century.

THASS' *TAMIZHAN*.

Thass started *Oru Paisa Tamizhan* (later *Tamizhan or Tamilian*, 1907-1914), the Tamil journal on June 19, 1907, from his Royapettah Office (Chennai), which was printed at the Gautham Press of Thiru Adimoolam. The journal was a collective effort of "philosophers, natural scientists, mathematicians, and literateurs" (Aloysius, 2010:239). It served as a mobilizational tool of the new Buddhist movement among the Subalternized communities against caste. The intent to publish the journal was "to teach justice, right path, and truthfulness to people who could not discriminate between the excellent, mediocre and the bad" (Aloysius, 1998:61). The newspaper came week after week on all Wednesdays for the rest of Thass' life, carrying a wealth of information on current events, interpretation of Tamil history, religion, literature and politics, against the dominant and oppressive religio-cultural discourses of the time to create an alternative discourse

Fig. 1. On 23rd June, the first issue of *Oru Paisa Tamizhan* (*One Pice Tamilian*) was published.

Thass' *Tamizhan* explores the myriad ways to articulate a novel critique associated with hierarchy as imagined by early twentieth century caste society, in which the entire system of signs and meanings were re-evaluated. Thass simultaneously rejected the nationalism propounded by the predominantly upper caste Congress party and their demand for *swadeshi* by using the print space to create an alternative imaginary. At the same time, he challenged the caste-Hindu domination of the Tamil print public sphere.

Thass used journalism to register serious critiques and discussion especially on literature and history. He possessed, in his personal collections, a plethora of palm-scripts from which he referred profusely. He was an expert reader, trained in using print-technology. His collection of materials in Tamil included epics, literary texts as

well as commentaries which very few in the early twentieth century even accessed. These palm-texts were circulated, he clarifies, amongst his community members as a legacy. This gives an entirely different idea about how the oppressed engaged and produced knowledge during the colonial period, with the emergence of print-modernity (Rajangam, 2008; Balasubramaniam, 2016, 2017).

Thass' proficiency in languages such as Tamil, Pali, Sanskrit, and English aided him to refer these texts and derive a speculative etymology, so as to constitute a creative historiography in his journal commentaries. His Tamil prose was relatively new. His use of epic-style, narrative based, historical investigations make it difficult to differentiate historical references over images of the text. The style of writing is experimental as it rebels against an external resource-based historical writing that clarifies, verifies, and is evidential. The oral traditions present among the oppressed castes were presented in the journalistic form, as commentaries, with which he subverted the existing practices of historical writing. In many ways, his writings inaugurated a millennial narrative on the relationship between language, literature, and nation.

Through speculative etymology, Thass creates a community imaginary of resistance. He becomes the sole mediator, an author/ity of a textual practice that is being transferred into anti-caste print cultures. As a Subaltern intellectual, Thass was at a vestige to alter knowledge practice by using journalism as a tool to gain inroads into the print public sphere. He corroborates with the idea that a sovereign nation does not only emerge, but gets contested tooth and nail, firstly in the language-zone, through journal print – contested not only against the colonial powers, but also against hegemonic caste-nations within a language-zone. *Tamizhan* largely provided explanation from literary sources and deriving historical interpretations, perceptions

from "within" the community which try to steer clear off Orientalist, Brahminical, and casteist extrapolation of the marginalised communities.

Tamizhan also created a space where "the voice of women remained concomitant and inseparable" along with Thass' hermeneutics of Tamil Buddhism (Ayyathurai, 2011:196). Apart from carrying an exclusive "ladies' column" in the issues, the contributors particularly problematized the role of Hindu dogmatic marital codes. They rejected, reportedly – Brahminical patriarchy, the four *varnas* mirroring the Hindu doctrines, questioned insensitivity to men's and women's sexuality, brought to light the practice of female foeticide and the tragedy of women's collusion for child marriage. Thass, as one of the earliest feminists of his times, constantly appealed for intensification of women's education which he argued would enhance the quality of their lives without depending on men. He figured out core issues of women's problems in India and its inseparability with the problems of caste.

Apart from opening a multifaceted feminist criticism of Indian society, the fact that an intellectual use of journalistic-print for anti-caste purpose was practised by scholars, such as Thass, is an important example of a legacy. But sadly, it is also a historical event of erasure. Their prolific participation imprinted their erasure in history. They are precariously absent in the visible, legible historiographies today. These historical moments must be recovered to bring to light not only a representative answer to the question of Dalit absence in journalism, intellectual practice, and public sphere today – in the present, but also as a resistant pre-history to caste and Brahminism itself (Leonard, 2017).

THE CHAPTERS

1. CASTE AND RELIGION: A CRITICAL SURVEY

To relate this study with other works and to position it within the academic field, the first chapter looks at the academic discourse on caste and religion. It contextualizes these arguments and discusses various studies on the categories of caste and religion to designate them into three different theorizations – constructionist, essentialist, and collaborationist. It serves as a backdrop to study heterogeneous yet continuous Dalit efforts to create a religion in the early twentieth century. The chapter suggests that knowledge production – that is writing and thought against caste – and religion are used by Dalits for an emancipatory practice; while the works of Washbrook (1977), Susan Bayly (1992, 1999), Dirks (2003), Trautmann (2009) and Orr (2009) are elaborately discussed to understand religion as category during colonialism for a collaborative Orientalism(s).

The chapter also foregrounds that an alternative anti-caste intellectual tradition (Aloysius, 1998; Geetha and Rajadurai, 1998; Pandian, 2007; Ayyathurai, 2011) creates a "vernacular cosmopolitan" (Bhaba, 1996; Pollock, 1998; Shankar, 2011; Mufti, 2016), which invariably opened the field on Dalit-Subaltern conceptualization of anti-caste religion in the 1990s political context. Anti-caste religion and Dalit politics are studied in the context of the religions of the oppressed and religion in the vernacular. The recent studies on Dalits and religion in the Western and South India are discussed for the same (Rao, 2009; Wakankar, 2010; Viswanath, 2014; Mohan, 2015). Their work demonstrates, much poignantly, that religion, caste, and subalternity in India are intrinsically linked with the notions of community. Dalit movements, significantly,

work towards ideas such as caste-lessness through taking a recourse to writing and history. This trajectory of the anti-caste thought is, often, at once religious and political.

This chapter serves as a review to study Dalit positions on religion towards a "coming-community" (Agamben, 1993). It sets a background to study and understand Subaltern, particularly Dalit experience in their engagements with caste and religion beyond a normative, causal reading of suppression, rights-based claims and assertions as culturalist-escapades. Ideas such as "looking-back," "turning away," "counter-claim," "insistence and immediacy" and "pre-history and community," "performative history and re-memoration" are discussed to conceptualize religion and subalternity, particularly, in the vernacular. In this attempt, it proposes that experiential hermeneutic of anti-caste religion works through a creative yet critical exercise of memory and history. Thus, the second chapter would discuss experience and community as an aspect and theory to explore and constitute a critical frame-work. This is to highlight the importance of Dalit hermeneutics and interpretation as a method in the works of Iyothee Thass, in the context of intellectual history of emancipatory thought.

2. HERMENEUTICS OF EXPERIENCE AND COMMUNITY: CONCEPTUAL PROPOSALS

The second chapter extensively discusses the hermeneutics of experience (Guru and Sarukkai, 2012) and community (Turner, 1969; Blanchot, 1988; Nancy, 1991; Esposito, 2009) as frameworks, beyond caste and religion, to study the twentieth century Dalit-subaltern movement. The theoretical discussion on experience and community complicates the neat boundaries that have gone hitherto to study anti-caste movements' engagement with religion and caste as categories. Following Guru and Sarukkai, the hermeneutics of experience against caste is characterized by a spatial hermeneutic,

which is responded by an experiential hermeneutic, and finally assessed by a transformatory phenomenology and archaeology. It draws inspiration from a trajectory of works from theoretical and conceptual terrain, to compare, extend, and complicate it with Dalit intellectual thought and practice.

This chapter also argues that hermeneutics of anti-caste language foregrounds community even as it envisages a critical framework to study the Dalit positionality on religion. The insistence is on the politico-cultural aspect of hermeneutics. Discussion on liminality, writing, compearance, absence, communitas and immunitas, death, and community captures the continuing complexity of the Dalit question, in the context of religion and caste, which is embroiled within state formation. A conceptual understanding and background to study positional interpretations, especially that of anti-caste hermeneutics, are highlighted. The counter-positions that are imagined and articulated, by Thass, are proposed as an aspiration towards moral hegemony of caste-lessness.

Community as a concept structures Iyothee Thass and the pre-Ambedkarite anti-caste thought in this chapter. Dalit theory of experience – especially Guru and Sarukkai – as well as community as a concept are explored to discuss a feasible method to study texts on religion by Dalits. Discussion on communitas explores the notions of community in the west, where society was criticised in the context of fascism, Nazism, and totalitarianism. However, in India, the context of Hinduism as a political marker and caste as its cultural marker calls for a critical exploration of community as a concept. Caste and Hinduism work with the identities of one's birth which in turn mark the society. Communitas is a serious concept to explore in the context of Dalit thought and experience.

3. IYOTHEE THASS AS HISTORICAL DISCOURSE AND CRITIQUE

This theoretical journey of ideas sutures an anti-caste positionality on religion – as an anti-immunitas position – that rebels against caste immunization and sanitation of life. It is in this connection that the third chapter lays importance to Thass who is placed within a historical discourse and critique. It discusses why and how Tamil Dalits, in the nineteenth and twentieth century, engaged with colonial modernity and religion in South India, so much so, they developed a viable critique of caste. A case is made by discussing works that linked the Dalits' engagement with modernity to displacement and migration. This is to highlight the role of experiential and spatial hermeneutic in producing an anti-caste movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Secondly, the chapter attempts a discursive analysis of Thass as a product of the intellectual and political climate of the late 1990s in South India. Thass largely remained within the intellectual discourse of the Tamil vernacular during this time. After a stint of ten long years of discussion, he was shunned again to oblivion.

The third chapter captures the historical trajectory of studies on Thass and discusses how he was made a part of an anti-caste discourse as a memory and as a part of Dalit legacy in the vernacular. In the Tamil intellectual and political scenario, there was a serious search for figures who precede the Dravidian movement. The increase of caste violence against Dalits post-1990s, and the intellectual and political vacuum that a global Dalit movement posed to a post-Dravidian present, indeed, paved way to search for a pre-history. Thass was literally rediscovered through optimal research and work by steadfast intellectuals, activists, and academics. This also signifies the epistemological and ontological emptiness that Dalits felt by the end of the twentieth century after a fifty-year Dravidian regime. Hence this chapter provides important content that serves as a significant critique of the Dravidian Non-Brahmin movement.

Thus, the chapter discusses various studies on Thass (Aloysius, 1998; Geetha and Rajadurai, 1998; Gowthaman, 2004; Dharmaraj, 2007; Pandian, 2007; Ayyathurai, 2011; Rajangam, 2016) which serve as a back drop to particularly analyse Thass' texts on Buddhism – with respect to the hermeneutics of experience and community. Moreover, the history of Dalits' engagement with British colonialism and modernity is understood differently from that of the post-colonial and Subaltern Studies. Hence the discussion on Thass as a historical discourse and critique also evaluates how scholars treated him thus far for various reasons. This chapter accounts all these frames within three themes – the Non-Brahmin discourse, the critical Orientalist discourse, and the anti-caste critique.

4. CASTE-LESS HISTORY AND COMMUNITY: *INDHIRAR DHESAM* AND BUDDHISM[14]

The fourth chapter extends the discussion from the third chapter and critically evaluates Thass' exploration with history and religion, particularly foregrounding his book *Indhirar Dhesa Sarithiram* (*The History of Indhirar Country*, 2010). Thass produces a critical anti-caste communitas in writing as an imaginative exercise of history and thought. The chapter engages with Thass' writings to discuss his dialectical hermeneutics in the early twentieth century, and highlights how this produced an anti-caste print world which significantly contested the textualities of caste.

The Tamil Dalits used print-journals to create an anti-caste community imaginary in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They not only rejected the nationalism propounded by the predominantly upper caste print-public sphere, but also laid out an alternative knowledge practice. This prioritized the oral traditions

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[14] *Indhirar Dhesam* means Indhirar's Country, and *Sarithiram* is history in Tamil. Thass interprets *Indhirar* as the Buddha, and *Indhirar Dhesam* as Buddhist country – which derivatively means Indian nation (*Indhiyar* and *Indhiyam*). Thus, Thass titles the book *Indhirar Dhesa Sarithiram*.

present among the oppressed communities. In Thass, the journalistic-print was used intellectually to retrieve, contest, re-read, and revaluate an anti-caste legacy. The chapter, thus, studies *Indhirar Dhesa Sarithiram* (*History of the Indhirar Country*, 2010) which was an attempt to reconstruct a Buddhist history of India as a counter to the established "story of caste." While it bemoans a particular genealogy of loss due to civilizational violence, it embarks into civilizational memory as a pre-history of caste, so as to inaugurate an anti-caste millennial communitas.[15]

The chapter argues that Thass treats history (*sarithiram*) as pedagogy to lay a claim over civilizational memory against Brahminism and casteism in the early twentieth century. He creates a hermeneutic of caste-lessness to explore the reserves of Tamil by particularly using the language for a counter-interpretation. Ideas such as "looking-back," "turning away," "counter-claim," "insistence and immediacy," "pre-history and community," and "history and re-memoration" work as modes to conceptualize a caste-less religion in the vernacular. While the caste experience is critically described as civilizational violence, Thass creates a creative hermeneutic as a thought against caste. He claims a civilizational memory through Tamil Buddhism.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

The most oppressed, as we would see in Thass' writings, resist caste violence by treating it as a genealogy of loss, and provide a resistant sociality through civilizational memory. They also treat history as pedagogy, making time and space open and resistant to practice an emancipatory communitas. Thass and his Tamil Buddhism claim a legacy

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[15] Thass' *Sarithiram* has a unique tale to tell. His narrative of India is originally a Buddhist nation. The very first part of the *Sarithiram* functions as a political template of Buddhist historical materialism, so to speak, which prefigures his examination in later parts of the series, of the emergence of *mlechhar* (*Aryan*s), 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 Smriti and its dehumanization of Indian society to the present.

of caste-free cosmology of an ingenious kind through a cultural attempt that retrieves a "genealogy of loss." It is a resurgence of the earlier suppressed traditions of a culture in a new context. A creative yet critical position that recuperates an anti-caste tradition for their own emancipation from different sources, particularly, those modernities from past which annihilate caste. It does not eulogize or censor without differentiating between the actual and the conceptual. This is perhaps the way forward to expose the "Dalit" category to its outside, and to its other so that anyone could ex-casteize themselves.

The anti-caste "communitas" of Dalits in writing gestures towards an autonomous embodiment, beyond just being restricted as a polluted shadow. It counter-looks caste with an oppositional gaze, with a resistant touch, with an act of annihilation. Its struggle against civilizational violence unravels caste's direct, insidious violence, and its chronic inalienable dishonour. It, hence, fashions a "genealogy of loss" that integrates experience, understands social inheritances, and anchors the living present with a conscious community through civilizational memory beyond conscious rage.

CHAPTER ONE

CASTE AND RELIGION: A CRITICAL SURVEY

This chapter discusses various studies on the categories of caste and religion within Humanities and Social Sciences and captures the "general" trajectory within the academic discourse. I designate them into three different theorizations – constructionist, essentialist, and collaborationist. And further, the chapter lays out the need to create an alternative framework that aids one to study heterogeneous yet continuous Dalit efforts to create a religion in the early twentieth century. It critically reviews the categories of caste and religion to analyze how knowledge production – that is writing and thought against caste – and religion are used by Dalits for an emancipatory practice. For this venture, I critically discuss the works of Dirks, Washbrook, Bayly, Trautmann and Orr.

This chapter also suggests that a search for an alternative anti-caste intellectual tradition (Aloysius, 1998; Geetha and Rajadurai, 1998; Pandian, 2007; Ayyathurai, 2011) within the subcontinent that foregrounds a "vernacular cosmopolitan" (Bhaba, 1996; Pollock, 1998; Shankar, 2011; Mufti, 2016) was started during the 1990s. This intellectual context opened the field for a new framework on emancipatory community to study Dalit-Bahujan conceptualization of anti-caste religion. To evaluate this from a critical vantage point, I discuss, the recent studies on caste and religion (Rao, 2009; Wakankar, 2010; Viswanath, 2014; Mohan, 2015) in the last part of this chapter.

ON CASTE

Caste, as an analytical category and a social reality, has been rendered extensive academic attention in India, especially after the 1990s,[1] from various disciplines. These studies have approached caste from different frameworks – namely essentialist, constructionist, and collaborationist. The prominent theses on caste were that of Social Scientists such as Louis Dumont, Nicholas Dirks and Bernard Cohn.

a. AS ESSENCE

Dumont's account of caste as a religious principle is an important framework which many significant social scientists followed suit. It hinges on social totality, and it is understood by critical social scientists as an over-determined site of Indian "difference" (Dumont, 1979). His contribution is vehemently criticized as it formulates caste society as a purity-pollution opposition which structures a sacral order that focuses on social practice of distinction and discrimination. Dumont's sociological theory also assumes that the ideological power of the dominant caste's conception of social order is a given social reality. In a way, Dumont would argue that caste is the undisputable essence of Indian society.

Another prominent mode of addressing caste, which extends another aspect of the essentialist framework, is through the tried and trusted category of "sanskritisation" (Srinivas, 1956) – largely re-describing the processes pointed out by H.H. Rilsey, the late nineteenth century census commissioner. The caste-mobility movements were seen as an appropriation of caste-Hindu practices with an attempt to rise in the social hierarchy. In this mode of reading, there is an emphasis on harmonious change through

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[1] The post-Mandal debates on OBC reservations opened a serious national debate on caste which diverged prominently from earlier referencing of caste issues to violence. The debates also revolved around the discussions on "merit," "efficiency," and "national interest" (Ilaiah, 1996, 1998; Guru, 2000; Nigam, 2000; Nanda, 2001; Pandian, 2002).

ritual adaptation over social antagonism. It buries the question of violence in

maintaining caste that chimed with the desire for transformation on the part of the post-

colonial elite.[2]

However, Dirks' critique of Dumont, and eventually any essentialisms,

consigned caste and religion as basically political. He, along with Cohn, opined that

caste and religion as categories framed identities at a historical moment for the Indian

polity in its engagement with colonial modernity. They identify the role of census

enumeration and colonial ethnography in contributing immensely to the construction of

identities for colonial knowledge production. Dirks' historicized analysis was very

different from Dumont's a-historicized report of caste. According to Dirks' thesis, there

is no outside of politics, in the historical subject formations through the categories of

caste and religion – they were always political. However, his study induces one to think

that the colonial state treated caste and religion as social factors – outside the domain of

politics, to redefine them as social categories and associated civic forms. Dirks'

arguments were to provide key analytical openings for scholars reconsidering caste in

terms of history and power relations, where the mutual entailments between caste,

religion and politics could be addressed (Dirks, 2003).

This dominant reading of caste through the modernizing approach linked caste

as an invention of colonial discourse. The view seems to underline the thesis that caste

has no real existence. Colonial discursive practices seem to invent caste, freezing extant

social relations, whereby, difference is generated through taxonomic practices like the

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[2] This framework could be assigned as much less a sociological category than a deeply political one – for it held that the subordinated castes would become more like those above them and that would be the end of the problem.

census and maintained through institutional arrangements like reservation of electorates and seats.[3]

The Indian modernity that was shaped had a telling effect due to this particular production of caste in history (as a discourse). Studies that concentrated on colonialism – particularly post-colonialism – and its effect suggest that caste was not merely a feudal, agrarian, and rural phenomenon on the verge of disappearance due to the development of a capitalist, industrial, and urban society. Contrarily, the mutuality of export of surplus and support to traditional native order and the corresponding axis between the caste-forces and imperialism was indeed the template on which modernity in India came to be constructed.

The skewed and sectarian growth of public education that emphasize on the classical and English rather than the technical and vernacular, with a priority to higher rather than primary education, empowered mostly the traditional, religio-literary castes towards dominance. Studies on caste have largely been silent about this monopoly on knowledge production, and have least contested such traditional notions of dominance on epistemology. Silently, academia holds that the Indian secular modernity that emerged did not categorically contest and oppose the traditional, dominant, native social order.

Scholars on Nation-hood studied caste from various aspects. They have looked at the nationalists' response to caste quite elaborately. Caste during the nationalist phase in Indian history received a wide research interest. Firstly, a set of nationalists saw the survival of the religion – Hinduism in India, with the survival of the caste

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[3] In fact, this scheme of study is ironically linked with the right-wing nationalists accrediting their claim that caste has no real existence. Hindu nationalists claim that the ontology of caste is rendered as nothing more than an effect of Governmentality. This structural emphasis, critiques suggest, elides the question of the possible complicity of the post-colonial interpreter in the practices and discursive constitution of caste.

order. Secondly, another group of nationalists proved and justified the scientific basis and functions of the caste order by using the language of eugenics. However, there was a strong reformist language of caste that contributed to the formation of modern Indian history. This language spoke of the malaise of caste system which took a reformist, nationalist, and sociological language. This aspect of reading caste often reduced it to practices of purity-pollution, and, especially, untouchability. This language often located caste in the realms of untouchability.

Caste got transcoded as a modern institution to shut out the "language of caste" from the public sphere. Caste is simultaneously acknowledged and disavowed in the secular modern Indian public sphere. Studies have alluded to two competing set of languages dealing with the issue of caste in the modern public sphere – one variety speaks caste by other means, and the other competes on its own terms (Pandian, 2002). The language of speaking caste in its own terms contested the various nationalist renderings of caste. They directly point out that it was futile to pretend that caste divisions did not exist.

As a different problematic, another view deals with the issue of caste with that of religious conversion. It highlights the nineteenth century missionary work and the fundamental inegalitarianism of Hindu religion, of which the prominent study has been of Gauri Viswananthan's *Outside the Fold* (2001). She sees conversion as a mode of cultural critique seen as both an individual epiphany and intellectual engagement with religion as well as a collective exit altogether. The issue of religious conversion is often linked with ideas of coercion, erasure of identity, and forced assimilation. Conversion, understood within the colonial and nationalist paradigm, assigns a set of meanings that

are based on violence. Religion, as a category, in a modern secular state is less a marker of the subjectivity of belief systems than a category of identification.[4]

b. AS CONSTRUCTION

A lot of studies have reiterated, much truly so, that three political conjectures have been crucial for the emergence of a Hindu bloc before partition. Firstly, census operations from late nineteenth century had major classificatory consequences. Secondly, census operations fed into the numbers and representation when the colonial government opened its space to Indian participation. And thirdly, oppressed castes moved from alienation to integration through the government of India Act, 1935, where a possibility of electoral politics emerged.

The pioneering thesis on the constructionist framework of caste, by Nicholas Dirks' *Castes of Mind* (2003), clearly theorizes that caste is a modern phenomenon, specifically, the product of a historical encounter between India and Western colonial rule, like Indian religions are. Studies that complicate such complexities on the categorization of religion and caste in the colonial period have been very few. For instance, Dirks theorizes that under the British "caste became a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all 'systematizing' India's diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization" (5). His thesis maintained that colonialism produced the conditions that made caste the central symbol of Indian society.[5] Hence, the concern largely rested on unraveling the historical processes that worked "to

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[4] Works on belief, comparative religion and religious nationalism address the inability to respond to themes such as belief systems. In fact, there is an over emphasis on the usefulness of census categories that should be approached cynically. Within a particular framework, words such as "secular" and "religious" have lost their descriptive value and function instead as signposts to given attitudes.

[5] Nicholas Dirks' pioneering work goes against a long history of writing from Abbé Dubois to Louis Dumont, and to the British colonial censuses that identified caste as the basic form of Indian society, as a critical departure. *Castes of Mind* intervenes and goes against Dumont's Marxian and Durkheimian stream of thought. Dumont had a faith in caste as the sign of India's fundamental religiosity, as well as a marker of India's essential difference from the West and from modernity at large.

naturalize the caste system as uniform, all encompassing, ideologically consistent and indologically conceived" (8).

Dirks identifies that British colonialism played a critical role in both the identification and the production of Indian tradition, by working through an Orientalist nostalgia of caste. He argues persuasively that under colonialism, caste was made out to be "far more persuasive, far more totalizing, and far more uniform" (8). Caste as a social identity was importantly political, which was used for mobilization during the early twentieth century. Hence, Dirks historicizes the circumstances of British colonial rule to study the ethnographic state's enumerative technology of the census, and the ethnography survey which in turn produced caste as a modern, political category by the late nineteenth century.

Studies, however, have also questioned the validity of identifying colonialism singularly, independent of the agency of its social formations and knowledge communities, in the construction of Indian society. Some went a step further to foreground the collaborationist framework, such as the work of Eugene F. Irschick for instance, that colonial forms of knowledge were critical in the establishment and maintenance of colonial rule in India. In fact, Historians, who criticize Subaltern and post-colonial historiography, have indefatigably argued that "a historiographical attention to colonialism alone, rather than identifying key political dynamics behind the exercise of capitalist domination in India, allows post-colonial elite to masquerade as the oppressed rather than the oppressors" (O' Hanlon and Washbrook, 1992:141-167). I take their arguments and extend it to discuss in detail in the third chapter.

c. AS COLLABORATION

David Washbrook's *The Emergence of Provincial Politics* (1977) uncovers the ways in which political institutions and relationships in South India changed to produce new forms of politics in the late nineteenth century. He sharply underlines the difference in the character of the social and the political in Madras and Bengal presidencies. He states that the analytical tools applied to modern India appear very blunt when they are applied to the South.

He, however, understands that the Non-Brahmin movement and the Home Rule League were as much the products of new structures as they were of new ideas.[6] He enquires into the period 1870-1920 in the colonial Madras presidency to analyze the nature of changes in the institutions through which political power was crucially exercised. He eventually understands that these movements – the Non-Brahmin and the Home Rule League – are a culmination of a long process of change rather than an inexplicable beginning of a chain of events.

The emergence of provincial politics, for Washbrook, is due to a culmination of magnate-based factions which inhabited almost every local institution. For instance, he argues that caste factionalism gets transferred as the struggle for a Non-Brahmin provincial politics in the 1920s. These are also understood as political paradoxes, where caste was configured as a new vocabulary of provincial politics in the late nineteenth century. Washbrook's historiography claims that politics in India is constituted by factions formed vertically through patron-client nexuses, which are motivated by

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[6] In this period Fort St. George worked as an economic entrepreneur, controlling commercial monopolies, building railways and digging canals. It granted and denied the legitimacy of social and political position right down to the level of village society.

narrow economic and short-term power interests.[7] Colonialism in India thus, he argues, is conflated through a collaboration between the coercive colonial state and its Indian elite.

Interestingly, for Washbrook, the British alone had no effective influence on the local structures of power during the late nineteenth century. He discusses in detail how Temples, as complex institutions, acted as brokers of political power in South India. However, he also mentions the efforts made to alter these institutions of religion continuously.[8] From the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, political life underwent a dramatic change. He argues that new kinds of collaboration, which mushroomed during the late nineteenth century, altered the functioning of colonialism in India. Change, he underlines, was wrought during periods of quiescence rather than during periods of protest. In other words, he indicates that the institutions of bureaucracy, law, and education played a major role in the emergence of provincial politics in South India.[9]

While making such claims, Washbrook controversially points out that the status and cultural divisions are not necessarily political divisions in South India. The political division of the society into Brahmin and Non-Brahmin makes no obvious sense to him. Washbrook invests a lot in drawing a cleavage between political and cultural categories

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[7] "The religious and cultural forms of patronage activity were especially merit worthy; and incalculable sums of money were poured into movements for the reform and revival of various aspects of indigenous civilization" (Washbrook, 1977:108). Washbrook hints that the Dravidian movement was an indigenous uprising that did not need any monitoring or orientation from outside, while emphasizing that the patron-client relationship formed the basic nexus of politics, where every publicist-politician could profit from using caste as a new vocabulary of provincial politics.

[8] Between 1878 to 1886 many bills were put before the legislative council to alter the institutions of religion, the organization of *Zamindari* estates, the allocation of forest rights, maintenance of irrigation works, the structure of local self-government and the nature of the income tax (Washbrook: 222).

[9] "They were both membranes, passing influence from one part of the body politic to another, and organs, capable of generating influence on their own" (Washbrook: 233).

of difference to understand the emergence of provincial politics in South India.[10] He argues that there is a fundamental difference between the Non-Brahmin movement, the Self-Respect movement, and the indigenous vernacular revivalism.

Cultural movements were confounded by the influence of new educational opportunities, or through new cultural perceptions. They were, he argues, logically independent of politics but were dragged into political life because they provided a pre-existing organization which was valuable in raising man-power. In other words, it might be underlined that in social composition, practical aims and doctrines, the Non-Brahmin and Self-Respect movements were as different as chalk and cheese. Hence, it is a problem to connect the Non-Brahmin movement of the 1912 to the anti-religious Tamil Self-Respect movement of the late 1920s. He insists that they were both anti-elite movements, although not against the same elite.[11]

Washbrook highlights, through his data from colonial archives, that through drastic institutional changes, a particular discourse emerged as a political pattern in South India during this period. Apparently, caste system was characterized as a system of social hierarchy validated by the tenets of Hindu religion as interpreted by Brahmins. Secondly, Aryan Hinduism was identified as affecting all rich magnates who in turn spent wealth and splendor on orthodox Hindu piety and magnate-driven upward social mobility. It was also noticed that it took the form of accrediting one into *varna* position, so that, one attempts an upward social mobility. And finally, he vehemently states that the social models which the magnates emulated, through political opposition and Non-Brahmin movement, were placed unquestionably within a Brahmin centric hierarchy. In

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[10] Washbrook indicates a scintillating paradox in seeing the cultural and political movements as overlapping. For instance, he argues, that the patronage networks which made revivals possible consisted often of the very same men, whether the cause was the regeneration of Tamil or the study of Sanskrit, the development of the philosophy of *Advaita* or *Saiva Siddhanta* (Washbrook: 277).

[11] For instance, the Justice Party – the political outfit of the Non-Brahmin movement – opposed the political position of certain individuals who happened to be Brahmins from Mylapore.

other words, he suggests that the Non-Brahmin movement in many ways replaced a

Brahmin-centric hierarchy.[12]

Ultimately, Washbrook concludes that the vocabulary of politics imitated the

language of the colonial state in all "communal movements," in South India. And

mysteriously, for him, the question of Brahminism as a cultural issue in South India

emerges only after 1912 – there was no prior political existence of this question before

the emergence of publicist-administrative identities. Washbrook's thesis on the

emergence of provincial politics in South India could be critically engaged with Susan

Bayly's *Saints, Goddesses and Kinship* (1992) on caste and religion in South India. Her

work significantly captures the relationship between religious ideology and social

practices, the links between state power and the origins of formally constituted religious

communities and caste groups. Not only does her study underline the impact of

religious ideas on social organization and practice, but also, it engages with the

collaborationist framework of caste in a nuanced way to understand religion in the sub-

continent. This research thesis, at best, extends and uses her theoretical position and

argument on the framework of caste within the academic discourse.

Bayly studies how colonized groups developed "strategies of resistance" (48) to

incorporate and transcend the intrusive impact of the trader, the missionary, and the

colonial administrator. In a dramatic sense, Bayly states that people have attempted to

reconstruct the society and their world view in their own terms. She claims that "history

for these people need not be assumed to have begun only after they were absorbed into

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[12] For instance, Washbrook refers that the anti-Brahmin or anti-Vedic agents, consequently, during the turn of the century, were mostly western educated Nairs, Kammas, Velammas, Reddis, and Vellalas – rich dominant caste magnates – who could organize caste campaigns to eradicate the use of Brahmin priests and vedic practices (281-282).

the encompassing structures of colonial culture and the world economy."[13] Since religious life in these areas of the South remained in a state of flux, "conversion," though seen as a sign of religious or political independence from an overlord, made caste identities malleable. Controversially, thus, the Brahmin was a catalyst rather than a representative of a dominant hierarchy. Christianity and Islam became features of independent religions and political life therefore, her study proclaims.

The work is premised on the opinion that there are no fixed or "traditional" identities in South Asia. Neither caste nor religious and communal affiliations can be static or immutable as part of the established "ethnographic reality" of the subcontinent. Her work suggests, firstly, that conventional distinctions between "popular" and "scriptural" forms of religion had little relevance in the South. Secondly, the caste system is far from an "ethnographic fact" of Indian society, as caste is historically dynamic. In South India, she proposes, caste identities came to acquire the features which one associates with traditional rank and hierarchy through the collapse of indigenous warrior regimes and the transition to European colonial rule. Thirdly, the impact of colonial rule hastened the creation of social groupings of the sort which have come to be thought of as "traditional" South Asian caste groups and religious identities.

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[13] Susan Bayly studies religion as a source of change and dynamism in South India. Hence, the study seeks to also challenge two prominent views – that conversion is an obliteration of the pre-existing beliefs and social ties amongst its new affiliates; and that convert groups escape caste discrimination but are irredeemably mired by them. She opines that the religious life in South India was understood through different aspects. One among them was the patronage by rulers. It is recorded that that the wet regions of the South became a domain of rich Brahmin enclaves and spectacular stone-built Hindu temples during the Chola period. Hence, religious life in South India is intricately linked with the emergence of the extensive Brahmin settlements near the river valleys. The "wet zone" settlement pattern, the economy and cultural sensibility is a notable aspect. Hence, she argues that South India was far from being a static and homogenous society in the immediate pre-colonial period. Therefore, Bayly fundamentally differs from the "sanskritisation thesis," and argues that it is wrong to see the South Indian culture as being solely shaped by the economic and social dominance of the wet zone's Tamil Brahmin and Vellala elites or by the "Sanskritic" culture of the Namboodri Brahmins and elite Malayali land-holding groups. But she understands that the religious foundations of South India were based on cults, deities and devotional tradition rather than one abstract and disembodied concept of God. Distinct cultures that came together to interact though their relationships were contentious and ambiguous. However, she contends that "sanskritisation" happens only in the late eighteenth century (Bayly, 1992:48-57).

By doing so, her thesis fundamentally distances itself from the essentialist standpoint as well.

Susan Bayly, in such an attempt, refutes that caste society is a fabrication of the colonial data-collectors and their office-holding Indian informants. Her work argues for a much more nuanced take, rather than "Orientalist's imaginings" or the constructionist framework. Scholars such as Inden, Dirks, Cohn, Appadurai, Breckenridge, and Van der Veer immensely develop the constructionist thesis to study and treat Western Orientalist ideas in isolation. Especially, they suggest that colonial rule in India had the effect of turning such "constructions" into lived reality. However, Bayly certainly treats colonialism as a subject to study caste and politics; but much more importantly, she also emphasizes the changes that were underway well before the British conquest. She underlines the early "nationalist" era as one that subtly overlaps affiliations of religious community, class, regional and/or linguistic affinity.

Susan Bayly forcefully argues that caste has been a real and active part of Indian life, and was not just a self-serving Orientalist fiction. However, she states that until the colonial period, formal distinctions and differences of caste in much of Bengal, Punjab, Southern India, North West, and the central Deccan plain were of limited importance as a way of life style. This finds currency with other scholars who have come to justify similar viewpoints.[14] She announces, firstly, that caste has been engendered, shaped, and perpetuated by comparatively recent political and social developments – as recent as the eighteenth century. And, secondly, caste has been the most effective tool and resource for the creation of common interests across the boundaries of region, language, faith, and economic status.

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[14] These arguments are largely discussed in G Aloysius' "Caste In and Above History," *Sociological Bulletin,* 48.1-2 (March-September 1999): 151-173.

However, while assertions of caste had built wide allegiances, it is also true that caste principles had also provided the means to exclude, disempower, and subjugate others.[15] She argues that caste is a fit subject to explore history. Caste or caste-like identities have proved to be remarkably durable and adaptable over changing and often threatening circumstances. They have worked as means to cope with a diverse and unpredictable social and physical environment, though in theory and in reality, caste principles have often been widely contested and modified.

Debates on the study of caste across disciplines, especially in Humanities and Social Sciences, have attempted to theorize a definition for caste. They have attempted to theorize it as a coherent system of thought and practice. They have equated it with other forms of stratification, and have also related it with differentials such as economic class, colour, education, and religious affinity.[16] However, a blend of both textual and ethnographic approaches have significantly unpacked the field of caste norms and values both within and beyond caste relations; interestingly, they have tried to discern a much wider array of cultural coordinates.

Susan Bayly's *Caste, Society, and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (1999) relies on both history and social anthropology to explore and interpret the contentious and multifaceted element of Indian life. She uses a multi-dimensional story of changing and interpenetrating reference points to analyze caste. She understands that for much of the nineteenth century, caste life among many pastoral and non-elite cultivating groups remained far more open and fluid than that of

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[15] Susan Bayly builds on the argument that in the later eighteenth century, the Indian regional societies underwent profound and complex changes that gave more Indians a stake in the traditional caste order. Hence, the book treats caste as a dynamic and multi-dimensional reality of Indian life, not an Orientalist fiction or monolithic cultural code.

[16] It is imperative to note that studies have also silently contributed, without any evident material basis, to a taken-for-granted generalization that people of low-caste origin are often significantly poorer, less well educated, more inclined to folk religion, and physically darker skinned, thereby, supporting claims of caste superiority.

the elite landed groups. She suggests that when the modern colonial cities of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century were established under the British rule, an environment where stricter and more pollution-conscious manifestations of *jati* and *varna* came into being. In fact, she states that, the prevalence of race theory became much alive in the polemics of the subcontinent's Hindu supremacist organizations.

She suggests that mainly two kinds of views on caste were perpetrated by studies on caste. The first one supposes "traditional" forms that exalt gradations of *gotra*, as it perpetuates the asymmetrical symbiosis of low and high status *jati* groups. The second one is that of the "modern-minded" or "substantialized" idea of caste as an exclusive and often militant bond of allegiance with moral claims resembling those of other modern imagined communities. A striking feature of contemporary caste life is an apparent resurgence of the Kshatriya-like or power-centred ideals of moral endowment which, she underlines, compel the power of the pollution barrier. She theorizes that the contemporary manifestations of *jati* and *varna* consciousness are very different from the purity-loving, holistic, *gotra*-conscious forms of caste identity. Rather, it is very far from the idea of an innate and dehumanizing South Asian cultural essence. In her effort to stage a balance between works that have taken extreme positions, Bayly attempts to suggest a changing nature of caste as a fluid discontinuous entity in a very heterogeneous atmosphere.

Caste does not just emphasize the ideal of kingship and power as an independent variable in Indian life and thought, thereby critiquing the notion of caste as an essence of Indian reality. As it indicates a high level of sensitivity to the nuances, especially in the matters of marriage and ritual pollution, caste has become a multi-dimensional model rather than a one-dimensional frame that work on binary

distinctions.[17] Alternative viewpoints from the field have suggested that power does not depend simply on economic or material differentiates alone. These works not only move out of the essentialist and constructionist frames, but also rely on historical perspectives and anthropological vantage points. They capture, therefore, much of the plurality and multiplicity of Indian life and thought, with the awareness that no single model can account for the durability and dynamism of caste.

ON RELIGION

Unlike caste, there is a huge lacuna in the studies on religion in India. Amongst the sparse studies, one of the prominent views suggests that since the eighteenth century, a process of "textualization" of traditions and religions had created a dichotomy in elite perceptions of what constituted an essential Hinduism or Islam. The dominant idea of religion came to be dissociated from other forms of social being, and both Hinduism and Islam, through this frame, were reshaped by the Christian paradigm. This view deliberates that local intellectual traditions came to be structured to a large extent by colonial governmentality (Balagangadhara, 2005).

Religion as a historical category of identification that refers to associated civic forms, just like the studies on caste, was also relegated as a colonial construction. Much of the studies concentrated on how colonial machinery conceptualized, recognized, and made Hinduism as an Indian religion (Pennington, 2005; Bloch et al., 2010). They understand the process through which varied series of Indian religious facts were miscued and formed as if they were one system of doctrines. This misconception was

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[17] Works have fundamentally critiqued and moved away from the Levi Straussian and Dumontian structural materialism to understand caste. They have also rejected views that have perpetrated that "orthodox Brahminism as the permanent heart" of Hinduism. In other words, an all-encompassing portrait of "homo-aequalis" as opposed to an Indian "homo-hierarchicas," was to create a hierarchical or a purity-centered picture of caste-values. These studies predominantly rehashed "Brahmin-centred" caste narratives.

understood as the result of using a Christian, specifically, a protestant conception of religion as systems of doctrine (Asad, 1993).

Works by Raymond Schwab, David Kopf, Bernard Cohn, and P.J. Marshall emphasized the need to look at the relation between Orientalist descriptions and the needs of colonialism. Bernard Cohn (1987) reasons that "the colonial study of India had shaped a predictable India that could be classified and hence be dominated and controlled" (quoted in Bloch et al., 2010:4). The constructionist thesis narrates that the Orientalist descriptions made certain features of Indian reality, such as the Sanskrit texts on Brahminism, as the essence of Indian religion, thereby distorting Indian realities.

However, Hinduism could not have been a substantial product of the European colonials and Orientalists alone. The constructionist thread essentializes the subject as passive receiver of a forged sanskritised Hinduism. Neither one questioned the conceptual limitations of Orientalism that reflect a European cultural experience of the Orient, nor do these conclusions engage with the studies on multifarious activities by the natives on religion itself. Hence, studies on the subcontinent's engagement with everyday religion are far and few.

Hinduism like caste, was also seen as the result of a dialectical collaborative enterprise, with the colonials and Indians on either side mutually contributing to the construction of it. However, it is also attributed that those who see Hinduism as a constructed concept focus more on the European and colonial agency alone. This is an effect of an assumption that at least Brahminism can be categorized in terms of the properties of the western notion of religion. It suggests that Brahmin collaboration, Hindu nationalist, and reform movements have sanskritised, textualized, unified, and

essentialised Hindu traditions.[18] In fact, those frames that work for caste also work perfectly for religion as a category. Expanding the collaboration framework argument, I now discuss the critical studies on religion in India that break new ground.

a. COLLABORATIVE ORIENTALISM(*S*)

"Orientalism" (Said, 2001) denotes scholarship based on knowledge of the ancient and modern languages of India. The Asiatic society in Calcutta, established by William Jones in 1784, was one of the premier centers of Indian Orientalism. Their researches constituted a rich repertoire of documentation that contributed to textualized caste and religion as historical and oriental categories. However, recent researches on the Madras School of Orientalism (hereafter MSO) – coined by Thomas Trautmann (2009) – consider that the scholarly contributions by Colin Mackenzie and Francis Whyte Ellis have emulated the works from Calcutta in its function but not in its content.[19]

The book clearly argues that both the schools were identified with varied points of view. The Calcutta school stood for the dominant view, whereas the MSO articulated an alternative view. The differences, according to their viewpoints, were significant to understand the diverse ideas of Orientalism.[20] The "Dravidian proof" in the South

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[18] A lot of work and importance given to the Hindu reform movements indicate that there was a widespread attempt to give a positive portrayal of Hindu religion as having the same properties as Christianity. These attempts made Hindu religion correspond more vigorously to the Judeo-Christian conceptions of a single, all-powerful deity. In fact, the reform movements are thought to have played an important role in transforming the Indian traditions into a unified and textualized religion mainly based in the vedantic religion of the Brahmins. They are also seen to be the precursors of the *Hindutva* movement today (Thapar, 1989; Frykenberg, 1993; White, 2000).

[19] The Madras School of Orientalism, studied by Thomas Trautmann among others, is constituted through the works of Mackenzie reports, Madras Literary Society, and the work at the College of Fort St. George. The College worked as a training institute and taught languages to the arriving British civil servants. It apparently replicated the Orientalist pattern of Calcutta, working through a triangle of institutions in which Orientalist knowledge circulated in Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay presidencies (Trautmann, 2009:1-25).

[20] The Calcutta school furnished that the Indian language system bears the Indo-European language proof. Its law, an extensive form of *Dharma Shastra*, was the expression of the Indian people as a whole. The notion of Indian history was constructed through a linear mode that generated the stereotype "that India has no sense of History." Only through the decipherment of Asokan inscriptions, Indian history claimed a cornerstone in inscription based reconstruction. The ideas of religion were propagated as Vedic

Indian languages emerged through the works of F.W. Ellis in 1816. Trautmann, in studying the particularity of MSO, and its contribution to the Dravidian proof, ascertains that the Orientalist knowledge did not come out of thin air; that is, neither was it self-generated nor was it a direct product of colonial interest. He rather argues that Orientalism incorporated something of indigenous knowledge. His study understands that the interactions between European and Indian traditions of scholarships were embodied by intellectuals from both sides.

One may say that the MSO acted as an incubator for new intellectual forms in the languages and literatures of the South; importantly for new careers of the Indian intellectuals, during a period of rapid change, with lasting effect. Indian intellectuals in the South were creating a new philology in detail for Tamil in the context of a transition from one regime of knowledge to another. Perhaps, the Indian intellectuals created new careers for an Indian modernity, and it was they, who cast the record of the past into new moulds and prepared it for a new future. Trautmann states that discussing the work at the college helps one to understand the interaction that emerged between the Europeans and Indians (5).

Studies on MSO categorically describe that language was at the heart of the matter in works done at Madras. The project predominantly desired to find a suitable register for Telugu and Tamil prose in print including language for government offices, newspapers, scholarly histories, literary commentaries, missionary sermons and translations of the Bible. Importantly, MSO entertained new ways of looking at the history of religion in India that departed from the Brahminical narratives issuing out of

Hinduism, and the law of the land through *Zamindari* system. Whereas, the alternative view that the Madras School articulated was that – the language family is Dravidian and the reconstruction of history was through a systematic collection and registry of inscriptions in mass. In the field of religion, it articulated the importance of Buddhism and Jainism – the heretic sects with no regard for caste differences, according to Vedic Hinduism. The debates on land have been captured as a three-cornered debate between *Zamindari*, *Ryotwari* and *Mirasi* systems (Trautmann: 3-4).

Calcutta through the Asiatic researches. In this, it countered and objected many views that the Calcutta school expounded.

The Asiatic society at Calcutta has contributed immensely to the formation of religion as a category in India. A lot of research work has indefatigably concentrated on the "Orientalist discovery of Hinduism as well as Buddhism" (Almond, 1988; Leoshko, 2003; Pennington, 2005). However, one may validate that, along with other scholars, inquiries into the development of Orientalism in India have largely focused on the activities of Europeans who were based in Calcutta – those men who grouped around William Jones and his Asiatic society of Bengal or the Baptist missionaries of Serampore. This have made scholars working on MSO mention that what happened elsewhere in Colonial India – Madras and Bombay – were for the most part ignored.

Leslie Orr's "Orientalists, Missionaries, and Jains" (2009) argues that South India has a different story to tell in opposition to that of the Calcutta school. She recognizes that missionaries and colonial administrators were confronted with challenges to the Judeo-Christian models, through people, practices, monuments, artefacts, and a multitude of competing stories about India's past and religions. The Calcutta's story, as it were, was only one of the many Orientalist registers that emerged from Indian presidencies. In the "South," she argues that the "secular" Orientalists on one hand, and catholic-protestant missionaries on the other, equally engaged with Tamil language and literature, even two hundred years before the Madras School even came into being.[21] In fact, these works made evident the presence of a religious cosmology

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[21] Many missionaries who worked on Tamil language and literature through religion, among them – Robert de Nobili, an Italian Jesuit, who became famous for introducing into India the Jesuit missionary strategy of "accommodation." He established Madura Mission (1606) and wrote his *Report on Indian Customs* (1613), in which, he describes the religions of the Tamil country in the past and present. In fact, he describes that the *Bouddha Matham* – the religion of the Buddha as the most famous and ancient of all sects in India (Orr: 264). He is said to have recounted a text titled *Jina Puranam*, which says, at one time all people of South India belonged to the Buddhist religion. By 1710, Father Constantius Beschi, another

that preceded the Brahmin cosmology, which the Calcutta school described.[22] The

missionary past, as it seems, was important in shaping the MSO perspective on several

fronts, which was very different from that of Calcutta school.[23]

Also, a descriptive register on Jainism emerged in MSO, which were of two

types – the first being descriptive accounts with details of Jain doctrines, practices and

local histories, or lists of places and texts. And the second concerns the history of

Jainism in Tamil, Kannada, and Telugu countries, with specific reference to the Jains'

struggles against their destruction by Brahmins, Buddhists, and others. They

significantly brought out crucial differences of the Madras school and the history of

religion in South India.[24] These narratives not only depict the past as filled with violent

confrontations among religious groups, which were represented as distinctive, well-

defined, and separate communities, but they also present Jains, particularly, as having

been in the past a dominant faith, enjoying political and cultural prominence.

Italian Jesuit, famously called as *Viramamunivar*, arrived and translated the *Thirukkural* – a work of 1330 short (two-line) aphorisms composed by Thiruvalluvar, into Latin. There was critical conflict between the Jesuits and the Protestant missionaries on the kind of written Tamil they practiced. Among them Bartholomew Ziegenbald of the Danish mission in Tranquebar, who arrived in 1706, sent "questionnaires" about religion to various prominent and educated Tamil respondents. Missionary work on Tamil language, literature, and religion is a well explored area of research (For details see Jeyaraj, 2004; Nobili, 2005; and Sweetman, 2003).

[22] The presence of Jesuit missionaries, sent from France, in the eighteenth-century Tamil Nadu find specific mention in Orr's work. The oriental work done by French Jesuits – Father Jean François Pons, Father Coeurdoux, an artillery officer Nicolas Jacques Desvaulx, and Father Abbé Dubois – posited a Jain/Buddhist versus Brahmin dichotomous religious cosmology in South India long before the Madras School came into being.

[23] Three aspects of missionary work seem to have been an inspiration for MSO, which it later extended and built upon. First, the Jesuit missionary inspired an Indological model that attended to learning languages, with a primary focus on the "high" or "literary" vernacular languages. Second, the Jesuit policy of "accommodation" led to an interest in and acceptance of local custom and communities, which served as the basis to produce knowledge about South Indian religions. And third, the missionaries approached the question of origins in the South differently, partly due to missionary agendas. The Jesuits sought to uncover an original crypto-Christianity or underlying moral code consistent with Christianity, and the Protestants focused on uncovering a pre-Brahminical religion. In both approaches, they were turned toward the Jains in South India (Orr: 280).

[24] Madras Orientalists such as – Colin Mackenzie (1754-1821), Francis Buchanan (1762-1829), Francis Whyte Ellis (1777-1819), and G. U. Pope (1820-1908) contributed to the collection of material that constituted a Jain religious cosmology in the South. For instance, Mackenzie treated the Tamil *Sangam* as composed of Jains who were forced to commit suicide by *Saivaites*. Mackenzie's collections report about the violence against and murder of Jains saints, as well as, the banishment of Buddhists to Sri Lanka by Jains.

Orr argues that the Madras Orientalists had a strong interest in the diverse history of religions in South India, particularly, the role of Jains, as well as an appreciation of the unique literary and cultural heritage of the South. Hence, they declined from a unified description of the religious history in the South. Contrary to the Calcutta school, which propagated that India more generally have a chronological priority to Hindus, treating the cosmologies of Jains and Buddhists as "extravagant and absurd," the MSO acknowledged a special note for Jainism, with a diverse religious history.

MSO's multifaceted work could be highlighted when compared with the theories that were emanating out of Calcutta. For instance, the Calcutta school did not focus on religious conflict as a central feature of India's religious history. Moreover, it gave little attention to the special traditions and conditions of South India. It became increasingly concerned with the connections between India and the West, as also with ancient Indian Buddhism. However, by the second half of the nineteenth century the notion that Buddhism had at one time been the "state religion" was widespread, as there was popular and scholarly interest in the figure of the Buddha and his teachings.[25]

The dominance of scholarship that came out of Calcutta – through William Jones, Henry T. Colebrooke, H.H. Wilson, and James Prinsep who served successfully as the heads of the Asiatic society of Bengal – shaped the course of study of the dominant Indian religious history. Apparently, the Calcutta school provided a model, in which, Brahminism was regarded as the subcontinent's most ancient great religion, while Buddhism emerged as a reformist movement making its own distinctive impact.

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[25] Scholarly work on Buddhist texts by Burmouf and other European scholars in the mid nineteenth century, the availability of translations of the Chinese travel tales to India, and the identification and excavation of sites associated with the life of Buddha through the work of Alexander Cunningham, the first head of the Archaeological Survey of India, made Buddhism appealing to the British public during the twentieth century (Almond, 1988; Clausen, 1975:1-15).

The view of Jainism formulated in Calcutta was strikingly different from what came out of Madras.[26]

Orr adds that the work and reports from the Orientalists of Bombay such as James Todd and Major James Delamaine, throughout Rajasthan and Gujarat from 1819 to 1823, were also different from that of Calcutta. They encountered Jainism as a living religion. For instance, Orr propagated that Jainism and Buddhism were one and the same. He foregrounds that after the persecution of Buddhism by Brahmins, Jainism retained its contents. However, in a passing reference, she claims that in South India due to the "sanguinary destruction of Jains by the followers of Shankara, Jainism was abolished" (278).

In fact, the Bombay Orientalists, Orr argues, took a midway between those of Calcutta and Madras. MSO rejected the idea of Brahminical influence on Jainism and mutual tolerance among religions. MSO projected the possibility of many alternative histories as it also complicated the language scenario in the South, therefore anticipating the later works of Caldwell and G.U. Pope.[27] To MSO, language, nation and religion were coterminous. However, over the period as the larger picture emerged,

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[26] Orr argues that the MSO version of the religious conflict in the South was remarkably different from what the Calcutta school perpetuated. For instance, Mackenzie described that Sankarachariyar was responsible for putting many Jains to death, as well as build Vaishnava temples over razed Jain temples, apart from finding that the Tamil *Sankam* was composed of Jains. Francis Buchanan in 1807 during his investigative journey from Madras to the countries of Mysore, Canara, and Malabar mentioned that the reports were different depending whether it came from a Hindu or a Jain. F.W. Ellis narrates that Jains preceded the *vedantins* – the followers of Brahminical religion – and that Jainism had declined only after the time of Shankara and Ramanuja, who had inspired persecutions of the "ancient faith." The MSO narratives predominantly portrayed that the Jains were abolished by the Brahmins, who, however had not been entirely successful in imposing Brahminical law. Ellis importantly describes that the followers of Buddha had been completely "extirpated" and nothing had survived. Ellis even recreated Tiruvalluvar in the guise of a Jain ascetic – cross legged, clean shaven, unadorned, with a water pot in front of him and an umbrella over his head. However, such a depiction of Valluvar as a Jain contrasts sharply with the portrayal of the author of *Thirukkural* in the Mackenzie collections as a bearded Saiva sage (Orr: 273-275).
[27] Orr informs that Caldwell barely mentions the work of F.W. Ellis, who had made the same "Dravidian proof" argument forty years earlier to him. Caldwell had claimed that "Jains were animated by a national and anti-Brahminical feeling of peculiar strength. They were instrumental in creating a Tamil literature distinct from Sanskrit literature, as indeed they developed among each of the Dravidian races a popular literature independent of the language of their rivals the Brahmins" (Orr: 280).

MSO failed and the Calcutta school achieved prominence. Mackenzie's complex

textual materials did not meet the Orientalist standards for classicism and antiquity.

If the project of Orientalism had invented the categories of religion and caste in

India, the scholarship on MSO shows that different schools of Orientalism competed

against each other, as one among them became prominent and dominant. Scholarship

on MSO also documents the contribution made by different native intellectuals who

collaborated immensely with the Orientalists.[28] In fact, Fort St. George College worked

as an archive for South Indian history precisely as an avenue to produce new

knowledge.

Certain institutional sites of knowledge production, such as Fort St. George

College, advanced particular kind of scribal practices which were developed through

Pandit skills. This offers an important leeway to understand the sociology of colonial

knowledge production. The Fort St. George College worked as a distinct institution

rather than a mere outpost of the Fort William College in Calcutta. It contributed

tremendously to the development of the "Dravidian proof" thesis, where its pedagogic

practices and research initiatives were of autonomous origins, and it bore a tremendous

political weight.[29] The College was also known to be famous for its patronage of a

small group of Pandits, who led a print-based literary culture in the city of Madras.[30]

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[28] Mackenzie employed at least seventeen translators from 1804 to 1821 for his work. Ellis employed Indians with a full knowledge of English grammar to work alongside Europeans to translate South Indian texts and inscriptions, which became the basis for training language teachers at Fort St. George which was established in 1812. Native intellectuals, mostly Brahmins and upper castes, such as V. Pattabhirama Shastri, B. Sankaraiah, Borraiah, and other Nyogi Brahmins worked closely with Orientalists (Raman, 2009:209-132).

[29] Arguably, the College at Fort St. George, contributed to the anti-Brahmin Tamil nationalist politics and critiques of the caste system in modern South Asia. The language training at the College was also linked with the protestant mission-stations of the church missionary society of the 1820s, and the *Munshi* model reflected the seminary model parallel to the Jesuit-run seminaries of the eighteenth century Pondicherry.

[30] New literary elite emerged in the mid nineteenth century who contributed to the Tamil public sphere. Apparently, the emergent Tamil *Munshi* literary elite worked as an upper caste conglomerate, who were head master scholars such as Tantavaraya Mutaliar, Appu Mutthusami Pillai, Vicakaperumal Aiyar, and Makalinka Aiyar. They wrote early grammars and published early editions of Tamil classical texts.

The College was central to the history of printing in the nineteenth century Madras, as it stood at the very centre of the new philological practices related to the printed book – a research area which is only slowly being investigated (which I explore in the third and the fourth chapters).[31]

Religion as a historical category in India, as scholarships on MSO demonstrate, was not identified and produced by a homogenized British colonial state alone. The studies suggest, rather sophisticatedly, that there is more than meets the eye in the constructionist thesis, which prescribes, that religious communalism was in large part a colonial construction. These studies open the category of religion to set up a complex yet engaging relationship with colonialism. This complex collaboration may be viewed as divergent and contingent to each context.

b. RELIGIONS OF THE OPPRESSED / RELIGIONS IN THE REGION

Only certain attempts at the textualization processes were given importance and studied in conceptualizing caste and religion as categories in the subcontinent. An elision of the groups who participated in the textualization process remains yet to be addressed and analyzed seriously. After discussing these pioneering works, which are recent and path-breaking, one might be skeptical about seeing caste and religion as historical categories of subject formations by the colonial state as a one-sided story in India. Academia in the post-colonial condition has predominantly traced the changing configuration of caste from 1850s to 1947 as only within the evolution of the public sphere, colonial governmentality, and debates on social reform. These theoretical verdicts cannot

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[31] For instance, the College edited *Thirukkural* in 1812, which was prepared by an entire committee of scholars. This marked the watershed events in the history of Tamil textual editing as a new idea of "authenticity" emerged using print as an "instrument." *Thirukkural* – the edited text – seems to bespeak a new philological awareness characterized by a quest for textual authenticity. *Pulavars* at the College spearheaded a whole range of new philological practices during the first half of the nineteenth century, until the College closed in 1854 (Ebeling, 2009:233-259).

adequately address the umpteen counter-cultural attempts in the socio-religious space by many socially subordinated groups during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century thorough out the subcontinent. To understand the agency of the Dalit-Subaltern and counter-cultural movements, one would, however, need an alternative framework to study the heterogeneous yet continuous efforts to grasp the intellectual activity of the subordinated communities in their autonomy.

However, sociological works, which concentrated on the early twentieth century, observe that a unified opposition emerged throughout the subcontinent against an emergent socio-political Brahminism within and without Hinduism (Aloysius, 1997). Conversion as a historical event, thus, was linked and studied with the categories of caste and religion. For instance, studies have contextualized caste in all its major dimensions namely – hereditary occupation, endogamous sexuality, ascriptive hierarchy, and religious legitimation. Prominent historians on India who worked on ancient history (Thapar, 1984; Chakravarthy, 1987; Sharma, 1990, 1996), used Sanskrit and Pali resources to construct the history of caste relations. They have together indicated that *varna*-caste is one kind of social formation in a single type of eco-zone. They underlined the fact that the society was a heterogeneous tension-ridden one which contained the seeds of its own negation.

The Historians who worked on the medieval period such as Christopher Baker, David Ludden, Sanjay Subramanyam, Burton Stein, David Washbrook and others, ascertained that caste while not disappearing was certainly abating, accommodating, and becoming attenuated. They understand that this period was one in which hierarchical and unitary forces lost their edge over those of egalitarianism and diversity.

However, scholars ascertain that the *varna* model of constituting caste and Indian society only became more popular during the British period because of a variety of forces, as discussed earlier.[32] Roland Inden opines that the imaginations and writings of Orientalist scholars and imperial bureaucrats contributed to the construction and reconstruction of caste in the history of modern India, attributing caste as a colonial construct. The studies by David Washbrook conclude that "a highly mobile and economically differentiated society was rendered stationary and traditional by the peasantization implicit in the colonial project" (cited in Aloysius, 1999:153). The studies validate that "during colonialism a collusive compact between the native and foreign elite indeed was responsible for essentializing caste and Brahminism" (*ibid*: 172). Aloysius further argues that colonialism conceived the society in the medieval times through a colonial-modern process of riverine-valley model[33] of the entire sub-continent with all its economic and cultural implications.

These studies have contributed enormously to conceive that the public sphere that emerged in post-colonial India was split along the class/caste axis. The upper caste elite who disavowed caste in public, while reinventing it in the private, could claim to be the secular modern Indian citizen (Pandian, 2002). Caste was seen as shaping and being shaped by changes in state formation, economic, and social relations. It is to be noted that the nationalist imagining of repressing caste into the cultural and private did not go uncontested by different groups.

The complexity of these initiatives that emerged in diverse socio-political regional spaces cannot be homogenized against a unified colonial modernity working

[32] See, G. Aloysius, "Caste In and Above History," *Sociological Bulletin* 48.1-2 (March-September 1999): 151-173.
[33] The difference between the social formations of the wet and dry areas of the sub-continent has been recognized and used to draw general conclusions on the social dynamics of the colonial period by several historians who worked, particularly, on South India – David Ludden, Christopher Baker and David Washbrook.

through the state. These frames, as discussed above, give an enormous importance to the post 1857 colonial state's shift, after the Sepoy Rebellion, in its engagement with culture in India. They try to understand culture as becoming an explicit category of the colonial government. Social and ascriptive identities such as religion and caste became sites of political conflict and competition, leaving the colonial state to govern the differences in the language of politics that emerged, thereafter.

This emergence, from a heterogeneous perspective, could also refer to the mushrooming of many cults, sects and denominations, a renewed interest in the Bible, and other sacred texts, missionary and evangelical ventures, multiple interpretations of beliefs and teachings. Archives that contest and look at how the oppressed (dis)engaged with caste and religion were never given a serious thought. Hence, it is explicit that a religious transformation in society during this stipulated time period, if studied systematically, could be understood as a "political" transition from "transcendental-experiential to ethical-instrumental, individual-salvational to collective-celebrational, and from passive submission and acceptance of the religiously-given to the active appropriation and construction of religious symbols and world views" (Aloysius, 1997:91) at a particular historical moment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

For instance, religion, amongst those discriminated and oppressed by caste, has received very scant academic interest within Humanities and Social Sciences. Nineteenth century India witnessed scores of concrete political awakenings, unevenly though, among several segments of the populace and spread all over the subcontinent. Numerous expressions of such socio-political aspirations emerged in the form of incipient organizations, activities and struggles, varying from place to place, community to community, issue to issue, both in intensity and spread. For instance,

Aloysius classifies three broad aspects of emergent communities that moved out and challenged the old order and its religious sanction. The movement, thus, is characterized as emerging against the ideology of ascriptive hierarchy, fleeing the stranglehold of caste slavery, and against the caste-feudal land relations (Aloysius, 1997:59-92).

The theorization of caste and religion has undergone a drastic change in the context of social movements that generate different kind of studies. The theoretical narrative that holds caste as a remnant of the past is rejected and seriously criticized now. Caste's transformation and transcoding in modern institutions are increasingly investigated, instead of the traditional anthropological notion that maintained caste as religious hierarchy which informs state action. Thus, relocated in the domain of modernity, caste is reconfigured as a contemporary form of power in its specific historicity. In recent works, therefore, caste is seen as a part of the history of modern India being treated as a contemporaneous modern phenomenon. Secondly, the norm of the secular citizen produced and dissipated through the nationalist discourse is deconstructed. Caste, thus, is re-conceptualized as institutional in the modern state as a form of power and privilege (Satyanarayana and Tharu, 2011).

Especially, studies on caste in the historical context of "Mandal, *Mandir* and Market,"[34] assessed and critiqued the elite invented and appropriated symbolic order of modernity, which at one hand froze caste as a social institution by disavowing it publicly and politically, and on the other created an exclusive abstract identity of citizen-subject. Political discourses and studies necessitated a search for an alternative

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[34]This refers to the period where the rise of caste and religious movements shifted attention to identity politics as well as to the economic reforms of 1991 that sparked off major debate over the future of State led development, liberalization, privatization and globalization. In the context of the post Mandal agitations and debates, the discussions on caste, Dalit politics and public-sphere were rampant in the public sphere (Ilaiah, 1998, 2001; Guru, 2000; Nigam, 2000; Nanda, 2001; Pandian, 2002).

anti-caste intellectual tradition in Indian history, which starts off with the Mandal moment in the 1990s. There was recognition in the Indian academia on the contributions done by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who was touted as an outstanding anti-caste, civil rights, and revolutionary figure in 1990s. In the context of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Mandal debates, and questions of religion in the cultural nationalist discourse, Ambedkar's works were reproduced, re-read, and studied.

Searching for an alternative anti-caste intellectual tradition within India, the 1990s political moment contributed much to academics and pedagogy. It was during this time that studies on the intellectual history from the Dalit-Subaltern perspectives were initiated. This rested on a political re-reading of works by social reformers from vernacular regions against an entrenched "sanskritised and Brahminized Hinduism." The other two figures who were popular for their writings were Jyotirao Phule from Maharashtra and E.V. Ramasamy from Tamil Nadu. Besides, many works examined how regional subordinated caste groups developed oppositional consciousness through political critique during this period (Bandyopadhyay, 1997; Dube, 1998; Geetha and Rajadurai, 1998; Prashad, 1999; Menon, 2006; Pandian, 2007). They studied how different forms of religiosity were created to self-fashion themselves, and how they refused caste stigma while imagining alternative forms of community. These movements are seen as possessing an independent autonomous culture that rejects any semblance to the structures of Brahminism. They were considered to inhabit a different domain of sensibility termed and framed in the realm of resistant Subaltern individuality and community.

ANTI-CASTE RELIGION AND DALIT POLITICS

Recent scholarship on Western India has researched on the complex processes of the Dalit movement in the colonial period. They studied how "becoming Dalit" was a specific kind of politicization – a process to become a political subject. They were attempts to look, a little differently, at the inter-link between colonial modernity and anti-caste thought that was forged in the Indian context. Their foray into research on Dalit studies looked at politics, religion, caste, and slavery – and ultimately community – as prominent frames through which Dalit as a category in history and discourse was constituted and categorized.

Anupama Rao's *The Caste Question* (2010) studies the Dalit political collectivity as a particular kind of re-signification, where the Dalit's cultural, social, and economic identity, which is ascribed in the negative within the caste structure, is re-constituted into a positive political value in the twenty first century. She incorporates religion in relation to the caste question, where the "untouchable" as a unique political subject is recreated mainly as non-Hindu and Dalit in this period. She ascertains that this was a political response to the association of untouchability with Hinduism. The processes through which the Dalit-Subaltern political expression emerged against the violence of untouchability became the central element of Dalit critique. Rao, thus, states that this could enable the stigmatized subjects to be defined initially as non-Hindus, but later as a cultural and political minority (6).

However, the "language of stigma" was also converted into a creative discourse of alternative associational imaginaries in many Dalit-Subaltern articulations from different regions in the sub-continent during this stipulated time, as discussed earlier in the chapter. The Nama-Shudra movement in colonial Bengal, the Ad-Dharm movement

in colonial Punjab, Narayana Guru's and Iyothee Thass' attempts in South India, among many others, are such examples. While they engaged politically with caste and religion, they also made collective initiatives, through many registers, to engage with colonial modernity so as to critique the caste Hindu order.

These alternative discourses move out and go beyond an imagination that is not just based on an oppositional "negative" language. These could be understood as accompanying a creation of distinctive political cultures in action through heterogeneous religio-cultural articulations. Rao's work tilts it the other way around to see the question of caste within the purview of colonial state and modernity, where the colonial state particularly is seen as inadvertently enabling a new politics of/for caste. For instance, Rao states that community as a theoretical category is a misleading rubric to examine changing forms of power and political subjectivity. For her, community is like caste – "a putatively primordial entity re-signified under colonial conditions, as the enabling form or receptacle of an aberrant politics" (10). Hence, community cannot be backgrounded as the context for Dalit subject-formation, as many studies do, but must be incorporated as a simultaneous dimension of its politics.

Rao argues that the imagination of a new political collectivity – such as the Dalit – is always contingent on conceptualizing the Dalit-Subaltern as both a stigmatized subject and a revolutionary figure. This makes the Dalit history as something other than the history of community. She understands that the Dalits are positioned "within," rather than outside state institutions as she problematically perceives that the Dalit conception of power derives only from colonial liberalism. Subalternity, thus, is reconceived as a process where Dalits' ideas, actions, and political interventions altered the content of caste and challenge the organizing principles through colonial liberalism and democratic processes in India (11).

Such a frame that rejects the political and philosophical significance of community is insufficient, as it lacks sensitivity to address an assortment of anti-caste movements that emerged as alternative, counter-cultural assertions and imaginaries in the context of colonial modernity. On the other hand, Subalternity of religious practice amongst the most oppressed by caste was given a serious academic attention by other scholars too. Milind Wakankar's *Subalternity and Religion* (2010) maps the relationship between mainstream and marginal religious practice, and its entanglement with ideas of nationhood, democracy and equality. The conceptual approach treated in this work seems to inaugurate interesting debates on the question of caste and religion from Dalit dispositions through the vernacular.

a. COMMUNITY IN THE VERNACULAR

Wakankar's study looks at the treatment of religion by the Subaltern groups – mostly Dalits – as an engagement with "vernacular cosmopolitanism."[35] Western India is the subject of his study. He frames that the religion of marginal communities at once affirms and turns away from secularized, historical religions. He is compelled to look at a certain origin – a prehistory – of the religious experience, among the marginalized, to understand the mystic traditions of the low-caste people.[36] His thesis captures the "ever slight turn away" from mainstream religions by the low-caste people. He argues that the

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[35] Vernacular Cosmopolitanism is a conceptual oxymoron that conjoins notions of local specificity and universal enlightenment. Formulated by Homi Bhaba, who talks of "hybridity" in and for South Asia particularly in Western academia, where the vernacular concerns the "minority," "local," and the "traditional" to legitimize English as more cosmopolitan than the multilingual vernaculars of South Asia. He problematically legitimizes the writings in the Indian variant of "English" as authentically vernacular and cosmopolitan (Bhaba, 1996:191-207). Critiquing the South Asian writers and academics placed in the Western world, S. Shankar in *Flesh and Fish Blood* (2012) states that post-colonial studies have remained elite by directing itself towards transnationalism and cosmopolitanism, but never towards the vernacular. Doing so, he accuses that, they have encrypted the vernacular as caste, thereby, overlooking it in multiple ways (28). Hence, Shankar, differing from Bhabha, appeals for a necessary turn towards vernacular South Asia to have any "intra-national" relevance (137).

[36] Wakankar's work largely evaluates the radical literary ontologies of Kabir-Panthi sects among the "lower" castes in Western India that have acceded to Brahminism and also on the Kabir corpus of the scribe and the poet.

forms of mystic speech that are part of the story is a crucial act of an "infinitesimal departure" (viii) from the mainstream. The fundamental hypothesis that runs throughout his work is that "there is nothing outside the already compromised or deeply problematic domain of historical religion" (viii). Dalits turning away from mainstream religion is a powerful argument against caste to theorize religion amongst them in the subcontinent.

Wakankar envisages immense epistemological possibilities for the Dalit engagement with religion as a narrative. He conceptualizes the notion of "looking back" (ix) – not just as a mode of loss to find a community – in Dalits' engagement with past. Accordingly, Wakankar understands that politics for the Dalit subject would be at the "cusp" of the political society. Hence, the Dalit critique's "turning away" from the mainstream is a possibility for a community. Though they reside in historical memory, they continue to operate in "willing" a community. This exquisite possibility for a community, for Wakankar unlike Rao, is epistemologically radical rather than a problem.

Wakankar's critical approach looks at the limits and openings of the Dalit critique in India. He terms it as "subalternity at the cusp" (3-10) – as speaking is interception for him, therefore, a Subaltern speech is an attempt to intercept a mode of thinking at the "cusp."[37] This act operates through the idea of "insistent immediacy" (3). Dalit movements are understood as insistent because of their rapid and remarkable entry into the political field. However, the community is marked through self-recognition as a social group, whose specific sense of being rests in the notion of

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[37] For instance, in his study of Kabir's poems, Wakankar observes that the resurgent Dalit movement has sought to claim Kabir as a Dalit God or a Dalit thinker and a Sufi saint who defied caste and religious distinctions. Wakankar interprets an interesting double-bind in Kabir's claim of Dalit-ness as it stems from his "loss of caste" as a weaver, a *julaba*, but also from his explicit reference to caste distinction in his poems (Wakankar, 2010:4).

"divinity," which is immediately prior to the historical experience of religion. Wakankar argues that this self-recognition finds its place in the pre-history of religion.

This ambiguous, yet, problematic reading renders a "primordial generosity" on the Dalit critique, characterized by an ancient form of "other-directed" behavior (4). Wakankar understands this as an extra-human notion of tenderness – particularly characteristic of an ethical stance which precedes Dalits' entry into politics as "self-empowered groups." He underlines the importance of this anteriority where ethical action precedes political. In such a sophisticated reading, Wakankar attempts to understand a pre-history of political empowerment in the space of a pre-historic Subaltern religion. This complex layout conceptualizes the idea of an infinity that resists any historiographical recovery. Thus, he recovers a form of counter-memory through interpretation. This mode of counter-memory as pre-history, gives a sense of community and social responsibility, which stems from "ancient forms of moral practice" (4) that predates religion. Therefore, Wakankar argues that the sense of human being that is grounded in the world of sensibility is indebted not to historical religion but to its pre-history of community making.[38]

Wakankar understands that the moral foundation on which the community is imagined is at the cusp. He argues that Dalit communities work between silence and speech which works as a symptomatic tension between the horror of caste discrimination and the political empowerment as caste communities in electoral stakes. Hence, though democracy and the ideals of French and German enlightenments may have given the moral attributes of a community, Wakankar registers that, it is the

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[38] Wakankar's work attempts "to uncover a prehistory of religious sentiment" (4). As far as this is concerned it understands that the prehistory of religion can also be a prehistory of contemporary politics itself as coincidence. However, in such an attempt the textuality of history is produced through the concepts of religion and politics.

persistence of older forms of community that are invoked cannily in the new political scene. He, therefore, inverts the presuppositions about Indian modernity by attempting to unravel the Dalit critical encounter with modernity.[39]

Wakankar undercuts and changes the question about the lack of incessant critique on European modernity, as well as the unconditional hope on modernization and colonialism by the Subaltern groups in India. He proposes, therefore, to evolve "a new idea of subaltern protest within modernity" (6). [40] To study such a protest, he characterizes three temporal axes for Dalit modernity – that of the past, the present, and the future.[41] The Dalit counter-claim of the past is a projection into the future from the present.

The claim of the past, which is a "counter-throw" to the future from the present, promises radical epistemological possibilities by Dalits according to Wakankar. This counter-claim could be understood in the realm of "co-optation" (6). Wakankar argues that Dalit communities are "insistent" in their political action because they "will" to be as communities. And, Wakankar interestingly interprets the Dalit experience as the "thrown-out" way of life, whereby, they insistently yearn to be thrown back "into" politics; even as they actively move from "Ek-sistence" to "In-sistence," "willing" themselves to be political communities in the present (7).

Dalit energies are understood as "immediate" because their mode of being is grounded in the "immediacy" for an absolute ground towards subject-hood. Dalit

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[39] Perhaps one may wonder why such a possibility be applied to caste-communities in India. Caste-communities' projection of the past – by looking back into religion and politics – did constitute a particular kind of entrenched Indian modernity. This remains unaddressed in Wakankar's quest on Dalit communities' critical encounter with modernity.

[40] This idea of Subaltern protest, Wakankar argues, should keep in mind the Dalit idea of the past as well as the Dalit idea of the future. Both these moves perhaps may turn around the problem of the present (2010:6).

[41] The past, Wakankar opines, is claimed through "pure" Dalit subjectivity. The present is understood as an experience at the cusp where there is a movement out of Subalternity, and the future is characterized by the Dalit desire and ambition within a political realm.

subjectivity is seen as a "movement" between the primordial ground of pre-history and the necessarily objectifying embrace of a historical subject-hood. In relation, Wakankar characterizes the Dalit subjectivity as one that oscillates between two subject-hoods. An oscillation that is located in the pre-history – daringly, in the infinite origins it presupposes. Besides, he problematically claims that a pure idea of "essence" is at the heart of Dalit experience, though, that experience is also marked by the "insistent" pull towards historical self-assertion.[42] Wakankar goes on to claim that a singular coexistence of miracle and violence is essentially experienced by Dalits alone. He states that Kabir comprehended the coexistence of the experience of divinity and the experience of violence in daily life. Hence, Kabir, for Wakankar, inaugurates not just a religion for Dalits but a new idea of religion (7-8).

A new idea of religion is inaugurated in the Dalit "counter-throw;" where an idea of religion is not categorically defined by history alone. The Dalit experience attempts to inaugurate a new concept of religion which was prior to history of religion in practice. Wakankar suggests that this is obviously reflected in the simultaneity of Subaltern complicity as well as emancipation in contemporary Indian political sphere. For Wakankar, it is primarily the priority of death and erasure of the Dalit self, which is prior to the politics of caste and race that draws the question of pre-history.[43]

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[42] This, however, is a difficult reading as it romanticizes as well as essentializes Dalit subjectivity to its definitive past. Though discursively valid, such a defense of essentialism as the heart of Dalit experience may belie the umpteen attempts made by the Dalit agents to transform and move-out of the dehumanizing and essentializing condition. The second chapter elaborates on the debates on (lived) experience and argues that experience is an initial condition that is essential only to move-out, to create space-less and essence-less emancipatory categories for a caste-less community to come. Caste, itself, could be categorized as violence that essentializes any relationship, and any anti-caste project necessarily contests such essentialism.

[43] Wakankar refers to David Lorenzen's work on *saivaite kapalikas* to understand and underline that the idea of pre-history is no longer limited to the historical bases of caste dissent or protest alone (11 and 197).

In a reflective departure, Wakankar lays out a preliminary frame where priority is temporal as it lays out a design to understand religion and history. Accordingly, he understands that religion, and its historical form, tend to neglect the perennial question at the heart of any ontological inquiry. For instance, the relationship between the singular history of one's life and, history as well as religion in general, cannot be located outside general history. Therefore, Wakankar extends this to undoubtedly state that the idea of history has been so thoroughly internalized in Hindu nationalism since the epoch of anti-colonial nationalism. Hence, he considers that to make a historical argument against it is redundant. Thereby, he relates that Hindu nationalism's basic premise could be one of restitution. Wherever an argument is made, the historicity of Hinduism is never taken into consideration at all.

Wakankar draws the philosophical critique of historicism from Martin Heidegger's renowned work on ontology – *Being and Time* (1927), whereby the approach to study religion is through ontology and philosophy. He takes Heidegger as a reference point to go beyond historical religion to observe that religion at its inaugural moment assimilates pre-existing traditions of moral rite and tradition. He borrows from Heidegger to argue that ontology assimilates religion.[44] A reason and plausibility for something prior to the context of religion and philosophical nationalities since the nineteenth century are scopes to extend the same.

Wakankar foregrounds that Dalit modernity encapsulates the limits and possibilities of the cusp. Therefore, it offers future guidelines for the idea of the social

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[44] "As there is history in the heart of all religion, there is always historical religion at the heart of philosophy" (Wakankar, 18). This statement affirms that religion exceeds the scope of philosophy; hence, a current account of ancient religious thinking needs to be closely looked at.

in India. He considers that the Dalit critique is of paramount importance therefore.[45] He claims that contemporary Dalit empowerment, while entirely historical in its bearing, is rooted in a ground that is, in a sense, prior to history. While this argument is totally new and incisive for Dalit epistemology, it also homogenizes the Dalit movement in its entirety over the period. Taking into consideration that history itself was instituted as myth in the post-colonial countries, and to imply that caste is pre-historic, and perhaps mythic, cannot be considered as a mundane point of view.

However, "searching" so as to "look-back" at the past is treated by Wakankar as an intellectual and epistemological notion of overcoming which transpires as a form of self that over-reaches. He sees in it, conceptually, the action of over-taking the entirety of the body that is understood as a locus of self-transformation. Wakankar's study of the Dalit movement in the realm of philosophical enquiry recovers the Dalit politics at the cusp of spiritual enquiry of the self and the body. It implies that there are limits to theory as well as the emancipatory possibilities inherent in radical empiricism. Hence, he hopes that new Dalit thinking should "glean" from hear-say, as it had done earlier. The idea of claiming to be prior and anterior to Hindu religion in history could be understood as a relentless attempt of Subaltern historicity.

This makes one to wonder whether Dalit religiosity could be imagined outside historicity – that is not sourced through Hindu religiosity. At another level, one may question how religion is undeniably linked with historicity, especially for Subaltern communities in the subcontinent, as a post-colonial condition? Is there critique that is developed, already in place, against religiosity and historicity by the Subaltern groups, particularly from the Dalit constituency?

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[45] For Wakankar, Dalit critique could understand the nature of a singular death and they could do more than just protest their own victimhood; they were in a position to take on the world. A form of mourning is always implied in Dalit politics, where mourning is read as a millennial supplement to political society.

For instance, Wakankar finds Subalterns as subjects, guessing whether there could be an indigenous modernity that is indebted to but different from the idea of Europe, in the radical "lower" caste protest and resistance, and therefore, in the "history of the popular" (48).[46] He studies the incorporation of Kabir's verses, vignettes of "lower" caste cultural protest, into Hinduism through the colonial mission to create religious institutions. This project, Wakankar understands, is at once "literary" and "historical." It apparently pushed aside the obscure and opaque aspects of the "popular," and ignored its origins in radical low caste protest and resistance.

Mired by the quest to unravel Kabir and the Bhakthi movement's contribution to modern nation, Wakankar's project has the hallmarks of both an interpretive and a historical agenda. He refers that Kabir and Bhakthi are reclaimed by nationalist historians, though forgotten as longstanding traditions of dissent and resistance in Indian society that symbolize "an antipodal relation to secular tolerance" (46). Indian nationalism endorses this vision for all faiths, much more influentially formulated by Jawaharlal Nehru's writings and discovery. These traditions implied a kind of freedom of belief that "refused to affirm anything but its own ideal if an indeterminate God" (47).

The search for an autonomous Dalit tradition of religious revival is the intention of Wakankar's project. Many a time, he underlines the necessity to recover an autonomous Dalit tradition from the historical and cultural mainstream of national culture, whereby it could broach a critique of its own ethical assumptions. Such a project which introduces a plethora of Subaltern religious movements across the

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[46] In the early 1900s, a combination of literary critics and historians of religion called themselves as the "historian of the popular," who were at once "literary" and "religious," transmitted the obscure seed of the popular to the soul of a nascent nationalist project. The history of the popular was the starting point from which a unified distant past was sought, where the origins of the greater national community was to be reinstituted in the future, when the foreign rule would be brought to an end (Wakankar, 2010:48).

subcontinent would necessarily harbor a rich re-interpretation of history, while re-reading figures in the context of discovering new ones.

On the same account, "conversion" as a phenomenon would be read differently altogether. In fact, the convert as a Dalit, Subaltern subject cannot be assumed in this project as possessing a given religious, social, or economic identity as such. It calls for a completely different, counter-reading – a critical, positional, and experiential interpretation of the category of religion. One need not mince words to say that this subject-position may remain "temporally" forever, as Wakankar instructs, an "in-between" of all ascriptions – that of place, location, and identity – as a minimal and intermediate space of negotiation, perhaps. He claims that the figure of the convert and the figure of the Dalit, endowed as they are, at a point of critical intensity, introduce a serious rupture in the idea of the nation (50).

One may understand that the emergence of the Dalit-Subaltern subject, in the moment of protest, is at once a break and continuity with the past. This subject is both a historical character and founder of a new idea of history. This imagination of a Dalit vision of religion is deeply intertwined in a pre-history, which is couched in the romantic idiom of protest and personal rebellion. This notion gives content to Wakankar's hypothesis that the prehistory of the popular is the prehistory of the elite (63 and 177). However, Wakankar's project, though interested in the pre-history of the Dalit movement and religion, fails to understand or explore the closure of the pre-history within the history of the modern Hindu-subject.[47]

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[47] Wakankar noticeably elaborates that the prehistory of the Hindu subject is made necessary by a historical crisis through Islam. He writes "The prehistory of the popular … is made necessary by that other prehistory of crisis, dovetailing with a corresponding 'post-history' that is to manage the crisis, which is the prehistory of Islamic 'intrusion' … It is the strangest of paradoxes that the prehistory of the popular … can also be the prehistory of the elite! … Arguably what saved mainstream India from cultural extinction was the great inner spontaneity of the popular. This of course begs the question: did

He reflects on the role of the colonial census as furthering not just the rigidity of caste identity but also promoting the idea that caste is the essence of Indian society. An academic aid of "sanskritisation" (Srinivas, 1956) – a desire and an impulse of each caste at each level to compete for prestige and for origins in Brahminism – was sanctioned by the colonial knowledge apparatus, he states. However, for Wakankar, the task of Dalit critique was to broach an alternative history of Dalit life – one that takes Brahminism as its point of departure. Against the idea of caste perpetrated within the colonial census, perhaps, a new vernacular of Dalit politics of religion should be given significance.

Wakankar argues that by turning the idiom of historical religion toward the Dalit – by bringing to visibility the idea of community from where it matters – so much so that it ensures that the religion speaks intensely to the political interests of Dalits. He calls it the new post-colonial phase, a post-colonial moment in the vernacular modern. This, he says, is a new vernacular of Dalit subjectivity. In this project, the focus is returned to the restlessness of the convert in search of the "self" – of a new individuality – instead of the other-directedness of the devotee. As such, Wakankar hopes that the question of subjectivity is solved as individual consciousness vis-à-vis the social and the community. Studying the issues of community that emanates from the exhaustive analyses of caste- subalternity in general, and Dalit community in particular, could be a foray into the idea of pre-history to categorically and theoretically understand what "community" is. But the difficulty is in capturing how the religion of marginal communities at once affirms and turns away from secularized religion.

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the popular benefit at all from *its* own incorporation by the elite?" (Wakankar, 2010:63). However, Wakankar does not inquire and discuss how the prehistory of the popular (dis)engages with caste-Hinduism. Perhaps, a presumption seems to loom large that the high caste Hinduism survived because it appropriated the popular as its own.

Wakankar's important work creates a sign-post to do a different kind of research on Dalit conceptions of religion. The positive yet fresh views and arguments – "looking-back," "turning away," "counter-claim," "insistence and immediacy," and "pre-history and community" – work as ideas to study religion and Subalternity, particularly in the vernacular; and they could serve as a creative blue-print to extend and discuss under-researched areas and spaces of Dalit intellectual thought. This research thesis wishes to critically extend such a kind of work. However, the historical insistence on the political aspect of Dalit subjectivity on the one hand and the spiritual pre-histories on the other seem to suggest that Dalit studies ask very different kind of questions to seek answers on the idea of community. It is neither an absolute constructionist quest nor just an essentialist search.

However, the necessity to explore the possibilities of experiencing community for the Dalit beyond the categories of caste and religion is a necessary research initiative that must open the vast South Asian "vernacular-cosmopolitan" (Shankar, 2011). Especially in South India, Subaltern groups – especially Dalits – used the reserves of language as a source of pre-history to constantly constitute community as an experience in the nineteenth and twentieth century. For this a theoretical discussion on the categories – "experience" and "community" itself is a necessary departure. But not before discussing and laying out the field to know whether community is possible in the context of the experience of caste-slavery in South India?

COMMUNITY AGAINST CASTE-SLAVERY IN SOUTH INDIA

Recent studies on historical engagement of Dalits with caste, religion, and colonial modernity in South India, during the very complex nineteenth and twentieth centuries, suggest that such investigations are important and forthcoming. Rupa Viswanath's *The*

Pariah Problem (2014) in the Madras presidency and Sanal Mohan's *Modernity of Slavery* (2015) in colonial Kerala systematically study Dalits and their efforts to become a community during the colonial period. These two-historical works are different in that they seek similar answers to different questions. Strongly retaining a historical rigour, Viswanath and Mohan probe – what made the Dalits claim a community against the continuous efforts by forces that denied them their self.

Viswanath's incisive study on the Dalits of the Madras presidency from the period 1890 to 1920 is particularly about caste as cruelty.[48] She patiently explores the joint efforts of the native elites and the British colonisers who become the beneficiaries of this cruelty. To justify this evocatively, she states that "The Pariah problem" is the name that the elites gave for an inconvenient reality (xi). The book captures the relentless attempts by officials and others to "redirect, redefine, channel, and divert the aims and projects of ordinary Dalit men and women" (9). This book is different from other academic and historical works that recognize and record the positive gains and remarkable feats of courage by Dalit leaders, during the same period, who voiced opposition and defiance.

a. COMMUNITY OUTSIDE STATE AND SOCIETY

Viswanath's work, in her words, is about "the unnamed Dalits" who risked everything to transform "the conditions of their existence much to the displeasure of the officials and caste-folk" (1). She traces "the peculiar recalcitrance of the Pariah problem" (2) for the first thirty years following the emergence of the problem in 1890, as the issue

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[48] Viswanath describes that the Parayar*s* of Madras were *atimai aatkal* (*slave*s) who belonged to castes such as the *Pallars*, *Paraiyars* and the *Arundathiyars* who were considered lower than all other castes. She states that they were often tied to particular plot of the land and were kept in miserable conditions, subject to violent physical discipline and unfreedom throughout the nineteenth century. They were forced to live apart from all others and even their touch was considered polluting, as they were considered degrading and were portrayed as immoral, lacking intelligence, and were unfit for anything but manual labour (Viswanath: 3-4).

became a public debate in the Madras presidency. She argues that caste and caste discrimination became a religious problem in this period, where "social" as a realm was prioritized where change could be sought, rather than the state's enforcement of it. In this effort, as discussed elaborately earlier in this chapter, she argues that "an alliance between the British and Indian officials along with the high caste employers of Pariah labour – who were the hereditary unfree slaves – forged a caste-state nexus" (3). She is one of the few historians to mention that "the colonial state was highly dependent on the Pariah labour."[49] In fact, she states that the entire system of production and the surpluses were the reason for "the enforced landlessness and hereditary unfreedom of Pariah families during this period" (5).

However, simultaneously from the 1890s to the present, religion played a major role in creating the rationale underlying the administrative policy and practice. Viswanath finds fault with the colonial state for creating caste as a key organizational feature of the native Indian society. She states that the colonial society itself systematized and gave administrative priority to the idea of caste, so much so, they reified it through modern enumerative technologies (8). As discussed earlier in the chapter, she takes into consideration that the Orientalist assumptions and modern enumerative technologies, indeed, created caste as a system.[50]

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[49] Viswanath qualifies this statement by arguing that the actual conditions of Parayar servitude remained unchanged even during the colonial period, as the caste-state nexus never challenged the condition of agrarian unfreedom. The complex forms of local power coupled with state authority deprived the Parayar of any alternative livelihood. She adds that brutal physical force and well-established practices of punishment, which continually produced conflict and violence were norms used for subordination (6). Hence, they were beneficiaries of the cruelty.

[50] Though one could argue that caste is not a single India-wide system that was particularly produced through the intersection of Orientalism and enumeration; it is indeed undeniable that in any given local context, castes exist and exert their social power in and through relations with one another until today. No one makes it clearer than Ambedkar himself in his seminar paper at Columbia University titled "Castes in India" (Ambedkar, 1979:3-22).

However, Viswanath sensitively determines that there is a fundamental difference between how caste works for Dalits and others. She states that there is a massive social hiatus in the political economy of agrarian production that differentiates the Dalits from all others (8). She logically argues that as Dalits are socio-spatially outside society proper, the society – that comprises all other castes – itself is never unitary. She substantiates this argument by stating that Dalit political claims were suppressed through concerted and unanimous resistance by caste-elites right from the year 1917 (19). Hence, the social, in the colonized society, was not an organic whole but was constituted by antagonistic divisions within (242). This qualitatively distinguishes the Dalit question – with respect to being and community – more than being just a social question.

In fact, she poses a harsher question to historiography that is practiced in India on religion – particularly that of the post-colonial ones. Why did the post-colonial scholars not adequately look at the missionary archives? She demonstrates that the missionary archives which were hardly referred and worked on, when read along with the colonial official and enumeration archives, tell different stories. In this effort, she clubs both the studies on caste and religion – which this chapter highlighted earlier – together. She critically carries forward important elements of research methods and different archives that Susan Bayly had earlier explored.

Missionaries, she claims, took an ethnographic interest in native patterns of livelihood, painstakingly recording information on various topics (11). She uses this data as an important resource to read against the records of the state on the matters of Dalits and caste. She suggests that the missionary archives record how Parayars of Madras, in the late nineteenth and twentieth century, transformed their own relations not only with the local government, but also with the agrarian caste regimes and the

state power (12). Hence, she clearly underlines that the local caste power was continuous with that of the state in the governance of the labouring populations that produced the caste-state nexus (13).

Breaking down the neat partition between the colonial state and society, Viswanath claims that the society was itself cross-cut on the question of caste. She proclaims, as did Ambedkar, that there was no society as a unit in the subcontinent, and the society is essentially divided; suggesting that there is no society in the Indian subcontinent. It was cross-cut by antagonistic difference through caste – particularly between the touchable and the untouchable. The social elites had links to state institution that systematically controlled labour and power (14). Hence, she narrates stories of how Madras Parayars during the late nineteenth century approached protestant missions and they demanded to be converted (15). Dalits seem to have approached the missionaries as they sought potential allies in struggles as well as they hoped for an opportunity to escape their deplorable conditions (244 and 250).

Thus, Viswanath claims, the missionary world was flooded with the discourse on "Pariah problems" (40-70). Though caste was redefined by the missionaries and was contained essentially as a matter of religion, it was also distinguished from being a problem of labour and political economy. The Parayars' alliance with the missionaries, she suggests, transformed critical aspects of contests with the village elites (71-90). Hence, Viswanath brings out a new perspective stating that the Dalits in alliance with the missionaries transformed their villages from "theatres of oppression to sites of struggle" (16).

She presents a strong picture – contrary to the expectations of the native elites and British officials on caste being a "gentle slavery" – that the Dalits seized on every

possibility to escape the yoke of hereditary bondage (190-216). Viswanath carefully

engages with both the state and missionary archives to compose a different picture that

portrays the Dalits responding eagerly to state welfare schemes that thoroughly

disarmed state officials and landlords (245). She clearly suggests that the missionary

archives brought out inconvenient facts about rural bondage that were largely absent in

the colonial official archives.[51] However, she also notes that there were tacit forms of

cooperation and institutional practice that represent the caste-state nexus in these

records. One is that of freezing or creating a closure to see Dalits as Hindus, despite

their radical pre-history.

It is to be noted that it was the British officers who first began to classify Dalits

as Hindus. In the first all-India census in 1871, major Dalit communities were not

classified as Hindu, and this provoked no reaction or protest from Hindus. In 1881,

1891, and 1901, census officials deemed Dalits should be classified as Hindus but had

persistent problems implementing this protocol, because caste Hindu census-takers

frequently refused to count them as such. It was in response to these difficulties that

Census commissioner E.A. Gait proposed to begin classifying Dalits separately in the

1911 census. Gait's proposal was not conceived as a bid to undermine Hinduism. But,

by the early twentieth century, the time when Iyothee Thass was more active, Hindu

leaders having become acutely conscious of the need to preserve the majority position

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[51] Viswanath accounts the narratives of Rev. William Gouldy of the Wesleyan Methodist church who was an early and ardent champion of the Pariahs of Chengelpet. He had lived with them for forty years and recorded their miseries and life diligently. She also mentions the work of noted pastor Rev. Adam Andrew, a Scotsman, who indeed innovated the Persian wheel to lighten the burden of the Parayars' work load, and was inevitably condescended by the Indian elites as "pariah Andrew." And lastly, informed by the missionary work, collector J.H.A Tremenheere wrote a powerful "Note on the Pariahs of Chingelput" in the year 1892, but the report was derided as sensational and denied. Hence Viswanath argues that the Historians were more accustomed to think about these homologies only as "civilizing projects" of the missionaries and European colonial powers; nothing more (264-265). This is identified as a historiographical problem.

of the "community" status, began adamantly to insist that Dalits were in fact Hindus after all (Mendelsohn and Vicziany, 1998:27-28).

This paved way to reimagine the process where virtually every religious grouping in South Asia came together as a pan-Indian community in sociological practice and in self-identification as a Hindu national community. Hence, an active mobilization to include the Dalits in the Hindu rubric was started off through the *Shuddhi* movement in the early twentieth century (Viswanath: 250-251). The politics of numbers arose creating demographic anxieties among Hindus that their numbers were declining relative to Muslims, as new enumerative technologies virtually produced demographic majoritarianism (Kaviraj, 1992; Appadurai, 1993).

Viswanath theorizes that this production of Hindu society, where untouchability came to be construed as a religious disability and Dalits were claimed as fellow Hindus by caste elites, was a joint venture of state officials and Indian political elites (252-255). A veritable venture of colonial and caste elites who had a collaborative oppressive nexus over Dalits! Moreover, independent India continues to actively define and retain Dalits as Hindus, to shore up and consolidate Hinduism for a majoritarianism. However, ordinary Dalit men and women, despite these obstacles, continue to begin arduous process of putting things in place through religion to create a "history of the people without history." And Sanal Mohan's *Modernity of Slavery* (2015) studies and evaluates such a history during the same period in colonial Kerala, by interestingly mixing the models of both Wakankar and Viswanath.

Mohan studies the agency of "slave-castes" – Dalits, in their engagement with religion in missionary church along with the anti-caste social movement – to understand and explain "the peculiar intertwining of religion and modernity" which is

not just subordinated within the realm of economy (13). Particularly foregrounding the discourses and struggles against inequalities, just like Viswanath, Mohan too explores the rich yet untouched resources of the missionary archives and the Dalit movement in the twentieth century.[52] His work is however different as he explores the activities of *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha* (PRDS), and accounts the activities of the enigmatic leader Poikkayil Yohannan (1879-1939), who mobilized the Parayars, Pulayars, and similar Dalit communities to establish an independent religion of their own in twentieth century Kerala. He argues that the idea of equality was instrumental in defining the strategies of the movement and the discourses it had initiated (13).

In a very interesting take on colonial modernity, unlike others, Sanal Mohan states that missionary labour among the slave castes led to a fundamental transformation of the latter's social world. Reconsidering the material and non-material aspects of colonialism as a lived experience, Mohan underlines the emergence of new spaces for the slave castes that helped them evolve new relationships with objects and spaces – in some sense, paving the way towards new hermeneutics of the self and community. In that, he suggests, the colonial transformation made them acquire a modern language, forging new relationships with the sacred and ritual places, which in turn made them engage with the emergent public sphere (33-34).

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[52] Mohan suggests that the early twentieth century Dalit movements carried forward the project started by the missionary intervention and the legal abolition of slavery. Even as the structures of oppression continued even within the church, he opines that some missionaries assessed at length the relationship between caste and social stratification that existed in Kerala as they were much concerned about the marginalization of Dalits within the Church. Hence, he classifies that the rise of Dalits in the social structure was particularly accomplished with the intervention of the missionaries in the nineteenth century. And from the mid-nineteenth century onwards their acceptance of Christianity was a political statement against domination (Mohan: 116-147).

b. COMMUNITY THROUGH MEMORY AND HISTORY

The PRDS movement, Mohan argues, took up the project of fashioning the Dalit self and community through a legitimization of collective memory as well as creative notions of history that provided a room for an emancipatory discourse (153-204). Particularly, even as the movement derived resources from the Bible, it also provided a critique of it by drawing upon the social memory of Dalits. It thus provides an alternative world view for the community. He suggests that this was due to Dalits' access to modern education and the new skills that came along with the intervention of colonial modernity. He states that "the new institutional spaces introduced by colonial modernity provided the context for the refashioning of the Dalit self and community" (204), which had an influential impact on the collective imagination of identity.

Besides, the question of language was crucial for the PRDS movement. Mohan systematically analyses the excellent compositions and orations of Yohannan to highlight the Dalits who creatively engaged with linguistic modernity – a vernacular cosmopolitanism of a kind. He claims that the proficiency and experiment with language saw a decisive change in the social space, as the Dalits made their foray into the emergent public sphere in the early twentieth century. This developed new notions of identity from the collective memory of the *Adi-Dravida* past. And the PRDS created this social space through the organizing principle of equality seem to be the argument (204-206). Moreover, Yohannan himself was considered to give spiritual solace and leadership to the community; and hence, the movement provided the historically oppressed and powerless people with new structures and political agency that eventually created new discourses on social transformation (263).

Mohan positively portrays PRDS as a movement that foregrounded a "community of sentiments" (264), where the public rendering of history as a ritual constituted the community. The (re)memory of slavery was transformed into a historical resource to negotiate inequality. This recourse to history of slavery – an imaginative recovery – was simultaneously coupled by expressive cultural practices. However, Mohan clearly states that this happened only in the context of modernity, where the enslaved resorted to a civilizational claim by acquiring education and articulating their social visions. He claims that this is one of the prominent features in the Dalit liberation endeavours in the context of colonial modernity (264). Hence, history for PRDS was a resource to be redeployed, however terrible the past was, so as to imagine a "social praxis of liberation" (265).

Interpretation of history, or interpretation itself, becomes a very important mode to render and create a community of sentiments in this venture. Mohan forcefully argues that history for the enslaved castes is mostly used as a resource to reconstitute the community. However, it is achieved more by a performative rendering as there is a lack of written history for the slave castes. The boundary between history and fiction vanishes in the discourses of history that were rendered by the Sabha. Mohan suggests that such discourses highlight the somatic experience of slavery, which makes the community through history. Thus, history is perceived as resource to search for a submerged past – that would enable one to become social agents (308-309).

Modernity of Slavery reworked the history of caste slavery to study the social transformation of Dalits under colonialism – a view that contests certain ways in which earlier studies had set to look at caste and religion as categories. A new notion of political emerged under the leadership of Dalit radicals who not only critiqued the caste-society, but were instrumental to transform their slave status. These were at once

religious and social movements which were largely inspired by the messianic power of the founders, such as Poikkayil Yohannan. These movements were outside the culture of caste domination, and they provided new practices of signification as they reworked mythical figures drawn from the Dalit past. Sanal Mohan theorizes that this social critique had evolved from a very strong religious ideology (316).

However, this process of ritual re-memoration of slave experience, as against written history, in a way also essentializes slavery and the slave castes. Such explorations of history were claims by *Adi-Dravidas*, where the lack of written history made them to claim that the Dalits were at the zenith of glory and fell victims to the invading Aryans. History, in such explorations, takes a performative and interpretative mode – a particular framework that I explore in the last chapter. Like Sanal Mohan argues that the lack of history is the most crucial root cause of the alienation of Dalits in Kerala (320); perhaps, one may state that this is not entirely false for oppressed communities across the subcontinent. However, the attempt towards performative rendering of history and writing makes the border between fact and fiction cease to exist. When read along with the Tamil Buddhist movement and Iyothee Thass, research such as this must start a new discussion on alternative histories and their social agents with the focus on the Dalit point of view.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

This chapter through an elaborate discussion on caste, religion, Dalit politics, vernacular community, colonial modernity, and slavery critiqued certain presumptions that have been doing the round in the post-colonial studies on Dalits. It elaborately discussed the studies on caste and religion which were variously distinguished as essentialist, constructionist, and collaborationist. Susan Bayly's work, along with

others, was discussed at length before engaging with the fresh yet ground-breaking scholarship on MSO and religion in the subcontinent. The chapter envisaged to critique and move away from the essentialist and constructionist frames. In this attempt, it sought to position a critical vantage point to do Dalit studies in the context of colonialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Works that highlighted the collaborationist framework were contextualized to foreground the study on religions of the oppressed in the region and in vernacular South.

Lastly, extending the repertoire of works that gave importance to anti-caste thought in the subcontinent, recent works that prioritized the Dalits' engagement with anti-caste religion and community in Western and Southern India during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were discussed at length. Their research on Dalits looked at politics, religion, language, region, and slavery – and ultimately community – as prominent frames through which history and memory were constituted and categorized towards a critical departure from other kinds of work on caste and religion. Ideas such as "looking-back," "turning away," "counter-claim," "insistence and immediacy" and "pre-history and community," "performative history and re-memoration" were discussed so as to conceptualize religion and subalternity, particularly, in the vernacular. Moreover, an alternative view-point that informs a critical engagement with colonialism, missionaries, and modernity by the Dalits seem to be the common stand-point of these important works.

This chapter sought a different kind of framework to study Dalit positions on religion towards community as a category. The chapter moved beyond a normative causal reasoning to study suppression, rights-based claims, assertion, and culturalist-escape as modes to understand Subaltern, particularly Dalit experience in their engagements with caste and religion. It wished, in this effort, to demonstrate thought-

works that go beyond teleological experiments to envisage a creative yet critical hermeneutics of a kind. In this attempt, it surveyed themes and concepts to propose and weave an experiential hermeneutic of anti-caste religion through memory and history. The next chapter would, thus, discuss experience and community as an aspect and theory to explore and constitute a critical frame-work. This is to highlight the importance of Dalit hermeneutics and interpretation to frame the works of Iyothee Thass, in the context of intellectual history of emancipatory thought.

CHAPTER TWO

HERMENEUTICS OF EXPERIENCE AND COMMUNITY: CONCEPTUAL PROPOSALS

It is pertinent to discuss ideas on experience and community to study the twentieth century Dalit-Subaltern movement as part of the intellectual history of India. It might unravel the haphazard nationalist movement's intellectual history, and possibly may counter it as one of its many valiant competitors. The theoretical discussion on experience and community intends to extend, add on, and perhaps complicate the neat boundaries that have gone hitherto to study the underlying paradigm of subaltern movements in their engagement with religion and caste categories. This chapter attempts to discuss community as a concept to understand the working of caste and religion for the Dalits. Putatively, it draws inspiration from a trajectory of works from theoretical and conceptual terrain, so as to compare, extend, and complicate it with Dalit intellectual thought and practice.

As discussed elaborately in the first chapter, the Dalit experience with religion and community cannot suffice as a holistic framework for our research, when enunciated and moderated just through the lens of modernity. Perhaps, an appeal to understand and engage with the idea of experience as primarily social and political in the cultural terrain could be the first step.[1] Secondly, interpretation as an aspect of anti-

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[1] The debate on experience as an epistemological category drew wide attention in the Indian-English academia with the publication of Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai's *The Cracked Mirror* (2012), which this chapter would take-up seriously. All references of Guru and Sarukkai in this chapter are from *The Cracked Mirror* (2012) unless otherwise mentioned. Meanwhile one is aware that the very idea of an experience which is in no way formulated or expressed is impossible to be comprehended, however, the specificity of experiences seems to demarcate different notions of self and community, where experience

caste language could be foregrounded to highlight the hermeneutics of community. These are the primary motives of this chapter.

The first chapter on religion and caste mapped an academic journey of caste and religion as categories. Informed through recent scholarships on caste and religion, it discussed works that argued passionately for an alternative framework. This chapter extends the ideas explored and discussed in the first chapter to foreground a conceptual framework and method to study anti-caste intellectual thought and religion. The chapter attempts to envisage a critical framework to study the Dalit positionality on religion. Is there a Dalit theory of religion? This chapter, hence, is an experimental attempt to draw ideas from theories on community.

In the attempt to study the works of Iyothee Thass, particularly, his writings on Tamil Buddhism, this chapter would lay out an integrated study of a Dalit theory of experience and community. By undertaking a conceptual engagement with the idea of community, this chapter aspires to frame the underlying relationship between caste and religion, while theorizing its foray into anti-caste intellectual thought. Lack of research in Humanities and Social Sciences, on positional perspectives by Dalit-Bahujan, seeks a self-reflective critical framework which lays importance to interpretation drawn from experience. In other words, insistence is on the politico-cultural aspect of hermeneutics. This chapter on community, which lays out a discussion on its aspects and theories, would primarily concentrate on this need to constitute a categorical yet a critical frame-work.

The chapter attempts to lay out the political importance of Dalit hermeneutics and interpretation to place and understand the works of Iyothee Thass in the context of

as the source of reflective consciousness plays an important epistemological role in the production of knowledge as power.

the intellectual history of emancipatory thought. The chapter would weave a web of ideas in the comparative field of ethics and politics, which would provide a methodological framework to study social imaginaries of Dalit emancipation. The focus of this thesis is to explore a Dalit theory of caste-less religion that emerges outside the location of caste, and to specify the discursive link between Dalit-religious thought and contingent community in the early twentieth century Madras.

This chapter sets out to discuss the works of Maurice Blanchot (1988), Jean-Luc Nancy (1991), Roberto Esposito (2009), among others, on community, as it endeavors to study the Dalit-religious movement in South India during the early twentieth century. It uses these theories to capture the continuing complexity of the Dalit question, in the context of religion and caste, being embroiled within state formation. A conceptual understanding and background to study positional interpretations, especially that of Dalit hermeneutics, are attempted here.

The Dalit thought as an ethico-political critique considers the theories on community, and critically extends the rich ideas and arguments on experience as a discourse. The first part of the chapter discusses *The Cracked Mirror*-debates (2012) to frame and expose the ideas that are to be discussed in relation to community. It would be a study on the Dalit conceptualization of community and experience with respect to ideas, thought, and practice.

The vagaries of Indian thought on caste have hardly discussed or studied experience as a category to conceptualize community. Hence, the dialogue/debate between Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai is an enriching inauguration towards thinking and reviving the category of experience, often misleadingly grounded in its specificity, to demarcate notions of self and community. It is interesting to note that

experience, which plays a serious epistemological role in the production of thought, is considered as a source of reflective consciousness, where it may also deny texts, the advantage of being authorial.

The engaging debate on experience has a responsive take on western theory and ideas too; especially on the epistemological and hermeneutic validity of the claims for experience and theory. Feminist and Black studies had inaugurated this critique long back. The critique on universality, however, has also generated universal theories of experience, which were ironically based on the critique of universality itself. This underlines therefore the importance of the nature of theorizing, and particularly the ethical stance that is so necessary to the act of theorizing.

HERMENEUTICS OF EXPERIENCE

In a path-breaking essay Guru, after having lost patience with Indian Social Science community, wrote in the *Economic and Political Weekly* about the appropriation of the Dalit discourse by non-Dalits.[2] The stubbornness of theorists and the recognition of ethics in the act of theorizing were significantly illustrated in this piece. This article implored "are the Social Sciences egalitarian?" and the question was largely ignored by the social scientists in India. It either received negative reactions or silence about Guru's challenge to the practice of Social Science in India.

A delayed response[3] by Sundar Sarukkai, a philosopher, attempted to take Guru seriously, even as it delimited his claims. He focused on the conditions that were needed to theorize, instead of inequality as a condition – which Guru had raised. He attempted to explore how experience could function as the special ground for theory.

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[2] See, Gopal Guru, "How Egalitarian are the Social Sciences in India," *EPW* 37.51 (2002): 5003-5009.
[3] See, Sundar Sarukkai, "Dalit Experience and Theory," *EPW* 42.40 (2005): 4043-4048.

Both of their attempts – which were significantly touted as an "Indian debate" – highlighted the question of ethics inherent in their argument, while theorizing.

It is instructive to discuss concepts such as (lived) experience, space, and untouchability to elaborate the arguments on community to understand Dalit thought. For instance, how do we conceptualize Guru's imploring – that a moral right is necessary to theorize lived experience. Are there differences that thoughts on community must take heed, when the notions of lived experience pragmatically claim that experience is "being" a subject, rather than about the subject? How do we understand the clarion call to integrate ethics to the act of theorizing, which makes lived experience as the ground for an ethical intertwinement with theorizing community?

For instance, the critique on the enlightenment tradition in Europe, particularly, gains importance during the post-war period. However, intellectuals such as Habermas also attacked Nietzsche, Derrida, and Heidegger as being politically dangerous in the context of the rise of neo-Nazist trends in Germany. Hence, the attack on the post-modernist, continental philosophy is also fuelled by the reaction to the Nazi rule, and the failure of intellectual cultures to sordidly stand against it ethically. However, Sarukkai argues that the Habermasian defense of modernity is also an attempt to universalize the dilution of guilt as a universal distribution of guilt. In such a context, he refers that Levinas' theory arises from lived experience. Levinas seems to construct an ethical theory that is directly mediated by a lived experience in which the idea of necessity is strongly encoded. Theory is to be felt – primarily as a sense than words. It must embody suffering and pain, relating the epistemological with the emotional, while bringing reason and emotion together (Guru and Sarukkai: 45).

In the special chapter titled "Understanding Experience," Sarukkai explores the foundational ideas related to experience, drawing on some "Indian and Western" philosophical discussions on the ideas of experience, and about how to think with feeling and emotions (45-70). As the complex relationship between experience, emotion, and knowledge is understood as a challenge to theorize experiences, Sarukkai deliberates that the very idea of an objective is a subjective experience of the world. Using the phenomenological approach to understand experience, he relates it with knowledge in an intrinsic manner and intertwines them. The importance of the knowing subject as well as the experiencing subject is highlighted in such an enquiry.

Firstly, to foreground this, Sarukkai argues that it is important to take the notions of identity, belonging-ness, emotions – both personal and cultural – self-knowledge, recognition of the other and the like as intimately related to the idea of experience.[4] But also, to enhance this argument, he states that the largely phenomenological traditions of knowledge systems in India must be highlighted. For instance, Sarukkai discusses *Advaita*, *Charvaka*s, *Jaina*, and Buddhist schools on how they conceptualize experience, self, subject, and knowledge. However, the hidden agenda to propose an "Indian theory" on experience, ethics, and community has its own problems in the context of Dalit experience and community.[5]

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[4] Sarukkai discusses how Lockean "utilitarian rationality" and Cartesian-self have acquired the central position in western thought, to talk of experience, self, and subjectivity. These dominant modes of knowledge traditions have conceptualized these societies, by their very conception of rationality and action, science and religion; and therefore, through a distinction of rational and individualist societies from the less rational and more collectivist societies (Guru and Sarukkai: 45-70).

[5] In a riveting critique on *The Cracked Mirror*, Satyanarayana's "Experience and Dalit Theory" (2013) argues that the debate offers a critique of the common-sense view of experience and particularly the limitations of social theory in India, if one foregrounds Gopal Guru's key text "How egalitarian are the Social Sciences in India?" If the book is just read as a treatise on Dalit experience and ethics, it might open itself for a devastating critique as it merely asserts the significance of Dalit experience as an epistemic resource but does not critically engage with the category of experience. Hence, he argues that Dalit experience has the potential to generate "centralizing categories" and "oppositional consciousness" to produce transformative theory, summarizing Guru's thesis. Instead of posing experience as knowledge, experience is suggested as a category, as an initial condition, whereas theory is stated as an

One's clamor to produce an "essential" Indian theory on experience, specifically different from "Western" theories, is not innocent. The power regimes that pronounce such a unified yet diverse school of thought in time, may have implications even for the self-acclaimed theories from the West. For instance, one might ask are the, so called, western theories unified and exemplary in their self-sufficiency? Were they self-made from within? Do they adequately define, describe, and theorize the whole of West in its diversity? Why this clamor to appeal that the East is as good or worse as the West?[6] Such a delineating project to unearth an Indian theory of experience and community, which is largely constituted by Dalit experience and thought, is not our concern.

Besides, the Dalit concerns are beyond the "derivative and *desi*" discourses (Guru, 2011:36). In a critical way to turn the argument around, Guru suggests that the production of experience hinges on the reproduction of spaces. He tersely suggests that without experience, spaces cannot fulfill their epistemological promise. Hence, for Guru, in the context of "untouchables" and Dalits, there is a constant repeal of "my" experience as "mine." The experience of these communities illustrates the externality of

essential condition to produce unified knowledge. The Dalit critique uses experience as a point of departure to invent a new identity, for Satyanarayana. It is hence a resonance for critical reflection and transformatory thought.

However, much more assertively, Satyanarayana argues that Dalit theory does not simply argue for the authenticity of Dalit experience or that Dalits alone have the right to theorize it. It is not about knowledge production or validating Dalit experience. And importantly, describing it as Western vs Indian theory dilutes the critical thrust that the Dalit claims to emancipatory knowledge. He sees Guru as outlining a political project to produce an alternative theory. Not seeing or highlighting this aspect of Dalit theory may miss the important issues that this project ethically thrusts, such as, social theory in India is elite and upper caste in orientation or it is not value neutral or natural. That it reinforces historical inequalities and that the domain of social theory is monopolized by the dominant castes. Hence, Satyanarayana rightfully argues that experience is a political question of agency and of democracy, when it comes to Dalits, women and marginalized sections in India, rather than just an Indian debate on experience and theory (K. Satyanarayana, 2013:398-402).

[6] For instance, while discussing the concept on self and subject in Indian thought, Sarukkai interestingly describes that the Buddhist thought is about "the denial of the self." In this interesting discussion, Sarukkai compares such a thought with that of Hume's "will," where the will to reason denies the existence of the self; judgement and rationality are the capacities that define human experience for Hume too. Sarukkai goes on to discuss how experience is conceptualized in Buddhist thought as "awareness." Instead of the "self" standing outside experience, witnessing and judging it; self-awareness works on immediate experience – reflecting on the immediate and conceptual experience, he claims. Hence for the Buddhists, self is a common site where thought and experience meet, which Sarukkai maintains differs from the western rationality tradition (Guru and Sarukkai: 61-66).

experience itself – externalized in the various kinds of spaces around them. In a much-nuanced way, he theorizes that a sense of self is always "mediated by a sense of self given to them by the spaces they inhabit or that they are excluded from" (Guru and Sarukkai: 70).

a. SPATIAL HERMENEUTICS OF CASTE

The chapter "Experience, Space, and Justice" elaborates the ideas of experience and space as theory (Guru and Sarukkai: 71-106). Guru explores the ideas of dignity, self-respect, freedom, equality, and social justice through a comparative study of politics and reconfiguration of spaces. Accordingly, he theorizes that the victims of caste come to terms with themselves through an *intensification*, where they seek to transcend the servile identity that is contained and proscribed within the dominant spaces (73). Guru states that the moment of radical discovery of oneself as an active or reflective agency presupposes the authorship of experience.

Firstly, only those who are pushed into a servile experience are likely to adopt a language of self-respect and dignity. Secondly, the ability to restructure or annihilate or liberate these spaces provides reason to deploy a new conceptual vocabulary, which is necessary to intensify the experience both spatially and intellectually. It is pertinent to underline the importance that experience is not viewed as knowledge. It is only seen as an initial condition to depart from, so as, to reflect actively, and then intensify the thought on experience. Guru studies how Ambedkar uses both the internal heterodox tradition and the external western tradition to reconfigure space as an emancipatory category. This view is largely different from seeing spaces as merely *desi* or derivative – spaces are fundamentally dynamic. Experiential space is considered as a culturalized phenomenon and not as an empty, socially neutral space. The act of annihilating and

remaking spaces is a promise for transformation; however, Guru warns that it must be aided by some element of experience.

The emergence of emancipatory social thought, for Guru, is linked with experiential spaces. He compels that the hermeneutic capacities of a category, therefore, do not expand solely based on the discursive content that these ideas possess. They effectively expand if the ideas rest on fluidity and flexibility of spaces that are inhabited by the people who are socially and culturally fragmented. Guru proposes that the expansion of ideas is coextensive with the expansion of spaces and not just its discursive content.[7]

Guru, in an Ambedkarite fashion, asks how to make sense of "the local configuration of power" or "the reverse orientalism" (81) as dual forms of indigenous domination – Brahminism and capitalism as practiced by the dominant castes on the marginalized in India.[8] The dynamics of space hence defines the formation of social theory as a hermeneutic. Using Lefebvre's concept of space, Guru suggests that "space is experienced in its depths as duplications, echoes, or reverberations" (81). Guru foregrounds experiential space as a phenomenon to conceptualize untouchability. The

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[7] Ideas and concepts do not acquire salience on their own; their reverberating power is contingent on the nature and dynamics of space. This argument recurs in Guru's conception of space for emancipatory thought. In fact, an experience of caste-based discrimination would prioritize social thought over political, so he argues. This is validated by his astute statement that "the liberal spirit of enquiry and self-doubt motivates people to question their location in their hierarchical spaces and visualize new spaces that can guarantee their existence on a much more egalitarian basis" (Guru and Sarukkai: 79). Hence, Guru suggests that if the spaces are hierarchically ordered, for instance an *agraharam* – such a space would produce concepts of their own, such as sanskritization. Whereas, the opposite happens if the spaces are relatively open. Spaces, however, by themselves, Guru maintains, do not have any control on the articulation of any such vocabulary.

[8] Guru states that "counter-sterilization" for Ambedkar becomes a historical necessity, since the Hindu society has already been sterilized by caste practice. This is necessary first to reach out to the sensibilities of a cross section in the Hindu society. Secondly, this is necessary, he says, to disrupt the one-dimensional imagination of the high caste Hindus by giving them a bitter dose of "embedded reason" through normative values. Hence value-loaded, abstract concepts such as mutual respect, social justice, and equality were prominently employed in the hope of rendering the closed society more open and egalitarian. For Guru, Ambedkar also used "modern" vocabulary particularly to make a dent in the "local configuration of power" that was built around "the two power axes of Brahmanism and Capitalism" (Guru and Sarukkai: 81).

untouchables, accordingly, could be seen as being pushed outside time and space. They were relegated to fragmented time and space, while their movements were restricted across social space by using rigid ideological lines.

Guru largely suggests that time and physical space are a pre-condition for the cultural articulation of space or shadow as ritual pollution. The untouchable's body as space doubles up as both corporal substance and its shadow. This phenomenon contributes to the humiliating experience. However, the real and the reflected – the body and the shadow, become equally powerful in mapping the space in favour of the socially dominant castes. In this, a discourse of untouchable bodies is produced, where their very bodies are turned into "a cultural space that the Brahminical system could rule over, write on, and regulate the ruling system of caste" (84).

In studying space as a culturally constructed phenomenon in India, Guru suggests that the dominant social groups historically structure and restructure a given space through spatial hermeneutics of caste. And violence seeks to restructure space in a specific way in the caste society. Hence, Guru invokes Ambedkar to state that caste-based violence is civilizational violence, which reacts to the Dalit struggle that transgresses boundaries, so as to liberate the rigid caste spaces. Dalits pay a heavy price, as violence is defined by the simultaneity of both the "presence" and "absence" of the victim of violence (83).

In this civilizational violence, firstly, violence is physical as it annihilates the corporal being – the presence – of Dalits. Secondly, certain groups, such as the untouchables, are eliminated – made absent – from social and culturally active relations. The simultaneous "absent-presence," thus provides the full definitional conditions for civilizational violence, or so argues Guru. Untouchables, at the zenith of

civilizational violence, "remain untouchable, uncrossable, unseeable, unhearable, unapproachable, and uncommunicable." As mentioned earlier, they are pushed outside time and space, to embody a "shock-absorber existence" (Guru and Sarukkai: 83-88). Interestingly, this civilizational violence marks its document on the body, reminding one of Walter Benjamin's seventh thesis on the philosophy of history – "there has never been a document of culture which is not at one and the same time a document on barbarism" (Benjamin, 1969:256).

Guru positively suggests that different spaces yield different concepts, especially when spaces are hierarchically segregated. For Gandhi, self-rule is the main point of contention; however, for Ambedkar, it is self-respect and social justice that acquire central importance. One conceptualization indicates the limits of other's imagination, due to the experiential space from which it emanates. Guru argues that experience – *anubava/m* – as a category is a primary epistemological resource to produce alternative categories for the politics of emancipation for Ambedkar. Hence, the Ambedkarite movement is an attempt to walkout from constraints, and get a fair chance to enter a new and liberating experience. Guru calls it as an attempt to become "placeless individuals who then would organize their social protocols with others on an equal basis" (90).

But the process of modernity, as it unleashed in India, only rigidified caste boundaries. Untouchables were seen as mobile dirt, and dirt is considered as mobile untouchability. Guru suggests that there is a spatial dimension to this ontology that continuously produces and reproduces mobile dirt; and thus, untouchability is a particular kind of spatial ontology even in modern urbanization.[9] For instance, the role

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[9] Ravichandran Bathran's asks searching questions on the many omissions of "Dalit" as a concept, and also explores the practice of Indian architecture as an embodiment of caste. He asks why toilets are

of print media in India was ironically significant not in terms of imagining the nation, as Benedict Anderson would passionately argue, but it just consolidated the hold of caste over financial spaces. Guru justifies this observation by stating that the dominant castes wanted "to recover in tradition the confidence that they were likely to lose in modernity" (93).

Movements such as temple entry, for Ambedkar, were used thus to negate the sacrality that is legitimized to spaces such as temples. It produces a negative, subversive consciousness amongst untouchables initially, which could be a pre-condition for political articulation. Guru argues that the idea of exit is important and phenomenal for Ambedkar, as temple is considered as a source of collective shame. It forms the basis to create a "cultural consciousness as the background condition for the articulation of the concepts such as social justice and particularly self-respect" (Guru and Sarukkai: 97). Hence, Guru states that if the Dalit movement is considered as a movement towards social freedom, then "liberation" is understood as freedom "from stigmatized places" that are "the source of a perceived moral plague" (99). Spaces, here, are not a source of humiliation, it is just a manifestation of indignity. For Guru, spaces of caste are a mere existence of humiliation.

Moving from experiential-spatiality to "ethics of theorizing" (107-127), Guru states that experience could be treated as a middle term in between "social being and social consciousness" (111). Guru argues that experience is an initial condition for its own theorization. It is important, he states, to theorize experience in its structural essence rather than in its varying content. In a rather fundamental distinction, Guru

constructed where they are in India, and argues that "there has been much discussion on toilets, but their location has never been touched upon or discussed" (Bathran, 2016:31-32). Moreover, he states that "toilets are built in congested or uncomfortable positions while the bathroom and living room are given good attention. I call the toilet (a place for filth) an outcaste in architecture, which needs an outcaste (untouchable) to always clean it. The stigmas attached to both are closely related to the caste system" (Bathran: 32).

does not assign discursive treatment to experience, rather he disputes such an effort.[10] He sees in experience a conceptual possibility for radical, political and philosophical, use.

b. EXPERIENTIAL HERMENEUTIC AS A COUNTER TO CASTE

Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology treats understanding and explanation as an ontological aspect of interpretation. It seeks to "bring into language an experience, a way of living in and of being-in-the-world" (Ricoeur, 2005:12-17). Concrete experience, then, becomes a necessary epistemic resource for the progression of concepts, not a mere journey of concepts that refer to other concepts alone. Guru claims that this is necessary to retain the moral and political force of the categories with a unified meaning. He underlines that caste must not lose its hermeneutic and political power to interrogate Brahminism. In the context, where regressive arguments are made in the name of "authentic" experience, Guru argues that it is necessary to study the philosophical foundations of emancipatory movements and their idea of experience that are historically produced.

These theoretical principles that look forward to bringing the category of experience to the center stage also try, rather vigorously, to frame "the Dalit experience as having the ambition to produce centralizing categories" that would seek "epistemic departure" from the existing categories due to inadequacy (Guru and Sarukkai: 121). Two premises seem to outlay such an effort. Firstly, the Dalit experience/movement aspires for a more universal, egalitarian alternative as it attempts to produce an alternative "moral hegemony." Secondly, social experience is "an inter-subjectifying experience,"

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[10] Joan Scott, to criticize the category of experience that was mooted in the context of feminist and race studies, contests that "experience is at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, and always therefore political" (Scott, 1991:797).

where individualities are transcended and transformed – through debate, persuasion, and public exchange of arguments – into collective yet subversive subjects (Guru and Sarukkai: 127).

c. HERMENEUTICS OF PHENOMENOLOGY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Sarukkai and Guru call for specific methodologies to study caste to philosophically criticize untouchability as a phenomena and condition. While Sarukkai calls for phenomenology (157-199), Guru hails archaeology (200-222). Sarukkai finds that the phenomenology[11] of caste is entrenched in the phenomenology of touch. He argues forcefully that "supplementation," the notion of untouchability, is an essential notion of Brahminhood. Hence, he calls for a phenomenology of touch, which differs from the European enlightenment tradition's concept of man as a political necessity. This phenomenology treats body as a microcosmic reflection of the world and importantly treats skin in a spatio-cosmological sense. Tactility is understood as a way of being in the world. The experience of the skin in the world, and placing the world experientially on the skin, Sarukkai argues, is the work of the phenomenology of touch.[12]

Sarukkai argues that this search is augmented by the perception that, when untouchables are refused the capacity of exploration through touch, there is a fundamental gap in the way they conceive themselves and others. The phenomenon of non-touch or un-touch as a sense, he argues, is created. The real site of untouchability, however, seems to be the person who refuses to touch the untouchable, as

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[11] Phenomenology studies the structures of consciousness as experienced by the first-person. It so closely structured by the notion of experience as its central structure. As a discipline and method, it is distinct but related to other key disciplines, such as ontology, epistemology, logic, and ethics. Phenomenology came into prominence in the early twentieth century in the works of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and others. Intentionality, consciousness, qualia, and first-person perspective are some of the prominent phenomenological issues that the recent works on philosophy of mind are concerned about. For more details see, "Phenomenology," https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/.
[12] Sarukkai discusses elaborately on the phenomenological accounts of the sensation of touch, untouchability in the Indian context, and the untouchable in the sense of touch, so as to bring to light the metaphysics involved in caste and untouchability (Guru and Sarukkai: 158-182).

untouchability cannot be reduced to functional reasons alone.[13] The non-touchable is

created to create the untouchable as an object (as a noun), specific to the sense of un-

touch.

In a role-reversal of sorts, Sarukkai claims that "in the most essential sense,

untouchability is about the always-present, potential untouchability not of the other but

of oneself" (189). In a way of countering the problematic thesis of Louis Dumont,

Sarukkai discusses the "absolute untouchable" – as a state of being in a hereditary

permanence – in the life of *acharyas*. A constant brahminizing of the Brahmins

preclude the community and make the community enclosed. He propounds that the

Brahmin's untouchability is valorized as a mark of greater purity, whereas

untouchables are "supplemented" into inhuman forms of violent treatment.

Using "supplementation,"[14] the notion of untouchability is perceived as a

supplement to the notion of Brahmin. Therefore, Sarukkai argues that "the necessity to

construct a group called the untouchables arises in large part due to the inherent

presence of the notion of untouchability in the very idea of a Brahmin" (197).

Untouchables become the supplemented *acharyas*. Through supplementation,

untouchability is outsourced to the real untouchables. Sarukkai's phenomenology

develops a foundational ethical response, one that is based on an ethics of touch.

However, a serious critique of this argument – the untouchable as a supplement to

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[13] This is different in the Western continental philosophy, Sarukkai argues, where the law itself, as a law of tact, is treated untouchable. Untouchability seems to be synonymous with "a gap." There are enduring gaps and therefore a touch is always incomplete, in the western philosophical context. Sarukkai argues that untouchability as an Indian phenomenon is not incompleteness. The idea of an untouchable is not an incomplete-being in the Indian context, according to Sarukkai.

[14] Derrida engages with the idea of supplementation by analyzing writing and speech in *Of Grammatology* (1976). Derrida's critique of the binary of speech and writing, where speech is seen to be superior to writing, leads him to suggest that writing does not act as a mere "supplement" to speech. A supplement, in fact, suggests that there is a lack in what is supplemented. The supplemented is incomplete and necessarily depends on the supplement. Speech is thus not independent of writing, nor is writing a mere supplementation of speech. This idea of supplement is used to understand untouchability in the Indian context (Guru and Sarukkai: 195-199).

Brahmin – is not only generated by recent critiques,[15] but also in Thass' writings on Tamil Buddhism, where Brahminhood is fundamentally rejected as false-hood with regard to untouchability and caste (this is discussed elaborately in the fourth chapter).

In his judicious critique of phenomenology however, Guru alternatively calls for an archaeological approach to unravel the untouchability of the unconscious. This is useful, he says, to unravel the "nausea-like" (203) attitude which is set deep down in the Brahminical mind. The fascinating insight that phenomenology provides, fundamentally, helps counter Louis Dumont's impudent thesis. However, Guru suggests that an egalitarian value to everybody, as an ontological mirroring of the other bodies, becomes an ethical impossibility in phenomenology. He uses the concept *panchamahabhute* (five elements)[16] – where a body is seen to be constitutive of five cosmic principles such as earth, water, fire, air, and space – to explicate the Buddhist metaphysics of body to study untouchability and inequality. Through this, an ontological unity, in tune with equality among bodies, is established across time and space. This ontological view places each person as having an equal sense of value – where all bodies are equated through the five cosmic elements that constitute them.

Alternatively, Brahminhood – in an entrenched form – redeems self-preservation through a structural stability. It converts the five-cosmic ecological principle into a sociological, hierarchical principle of protection, security, and discrimination – thereby creating a need to remain socially superior. Here all the five cosmic principles, Guru discerningly demonstrates, are converted by the upper castes in

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[15] Parthasarathy Muthukkaruppan places a scathing critique against Sarukkai for understanding untouchability as supplementation, and the untouchables as "supplemented *acharyas*." He argues that caste is fundamentally a relationship based on violence, and untouchability is civilizational violence on a community; not on any individuals alone – who might be an *acharya*. Communities, regardless of difference, are violated through caste and untouchability (Muthukkaruppan, 2017:49-72).

[16] The five elements – earth, water, fire, air, and space – are collectively termed as *panchamahabhute*. Native medical systems such as Ayurveda and Siddha consider these elements as minutely constituting the living as well as the non-living matters of the world.

their varied forms only to practice untouchability (205-212). All the elements are made possible, accordingly, to produce the ideal and the despicable untouchable. This conversion of *panchamahabhute* quarantines ecology from social danger. It converts the untouchable into a "walking carrion" (211), who becomes the repository of the impurities of the touchable, by force.

However, Guru suggests that the lower caste struggles present self-worth as equal worth; it undercuts Hobbesian self-preservation of the superior self. Lower caste movements democratize the very idea of touch. Interestingly, they inaugurate a metaphysics of touch that is emancipatory. Guru states that it helps overcome the mutual reification of culturally folded bodies. More importantly, phenomenology, Guru argues, does not have a transformative value for the slave and the outcaste. Caste is treated as the essence, and untouchability as its existence. Hence, only a deconstructive mode of analysis that unravels caste as an essential problem, he opines, could be useful through an archaeology of untouchability (Guru and Sarukkai: 218-222).

Archaeology, perhaps, seems to seek access into the perceived inalterability of the "Indian mind;" it reveals the persisting element of caste, which hides within itself.[17] These self-definitions of the ideal untouchable – the Brahmin – using caste becomes possible, Guru argues, only in relation to the ascriptive identity of the untouchables. The sacred self cannot exist without the existence of the other as the despicable untouchable. Caste sits deep in the anxious self, and produces a self-preserved security

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[17] For instance, Guru argues that the "Indian mind" essentially operates through the subtle act of transferring value from one sphere to another. Hence it essentially hides a persisting element of caste with opacity and anonymity deep inside the mind. Caste in an *un*-intimate social context – in modern spaces where face-to-face casteism is impossible – secured domestic space seem to work, Guru argues, as a sphere of stability and sovereignty. In these specific contexts, Archaeology deflates the pretension of self-preservation. Guru also suggests that archaeology has a "double bind" as it poses both offensive and defensive mechanism. The offensive archaeology, mostly exercised by the upper castes, establishes an ontological link with the ritually superior self. Whereas the defensive archaeology tries to evade and escape, the offense (218).

through untouchability as a mode of existence. Domestic space provides a stable context for the pure/ideal untouchables to overcome his/her anxiety. It becomes sanitized, and offers space for conducting purificatory functions. It becomes the sphere of sovereignty for the caste-self.

This engaging debate explored the politics of experience and the ethics of theorizing. Guru and Sarukkai raised the question of community and the pre-requisite necessary to theorize community, by expanding the conceptual categories associated with caste and untouchability. In a way, the invigorating discussion in *The Cracked Mirror* on experience provides an important context, where the theories on community may find relevance to study Iyothee Thass' work as anti-caste thought and practice; it would be an attempt to explore the politics of experience and the ethics of theorizing.

One, perhaps, may ask – what are the pre-requisites to theorize community, such as Dalits, where some experiences are unique only to communities? A necessity to theorize experience as a category first arises before raising questions about theory-experience relationship. This is useful to address the problems of asymmetry that are raised by the ethics of theorizing and the politics of experience which are inherent in the Dalit discourse. The concepts, thus discussed – (lived) experience, space, ethics, and hermeneutics – are useful to elaborate the thoughts on community, so as to understand Dalit thought. This theoretical discussion is relevant to the notion of Dalit hermeneutics that emerged in the early twentieth century which created a religious anti-caste communitas of a kind.

HERMENEUTICS OF COMMUNITY

The early twentieth century with the emergence of print-public spheres in the context of industrial, colonial modernity, saw umpteen print journals run by Dalits in South India

in the Tamil region. However, the Dalit subject was also variously constituted by different historical forces as discourse. As discussed in the first chapter, the powerful and hegemonic among them were the missionaries, colonial state-craft, nationalist and religious reformers – Indian National Congress and the regional movements. These discourses constituted the oppressed, suppressed, and "untouchable" subject as vulnerable, yet-to-be reformed, marginal, and categorically problematic. These discourses, during this period, strongly fed into a global circulation of a frozen image of the Parayar as vulnerable.

The first chapter discussed elaborately umpteen frameworks and methodologies that have studied this phenomenon from historical, anthropological, and sociological view-points, especially, to categorize and constitute the study of religion and caste.[18] However, compelling and competing narratives sprang out of a distinctive experiential location, during the same period, which counters and complicates the hegemonic discourses – one such important work by Sanal Mohan was discussed to flag the relationship between experience and community for Dalits. They evinced an alternative notion of history perhaps as pedagogy, which becomes the ideological base over which the dispossessed communities are constituted. Therefore, these Dalit positional representations of history become important in the formation of community.

To foreground the importance of subaltern, positional, interpretative counter-cultures as anti-caste hermeneutics, and to integrate the theories of experience and community, this chapter would move on to discuss Victor Turner's anthropological use

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[18] The first chapter discussed and described the academic discourse on religion and caste as categories, which are constituted to study the Dalit question. Such an attempt is made, mainly, to imagine and argue for an alter-space, within academic discourse, where the Dalit question could be treated as a liminal phenomenon, where to talk about the Dalit experience and thought is not only to talk about religion and caste, but also about outside and against caste-Hinduism, at once.

of the Latin loan word *communitas*,[19] and demonstrate the theoretical possibility of constituting community as a framework. This would be followed by discussions on other scholarships on community to frame this specific study on Dalit thought on religion.

a. LIMINALITY

Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process* (1969), his seminal work, renders anthropological meaning to the ideas of liminality and *communitas.* The study of liminal phenomena – those attributes that define the "threshold people" – Turner argues, offers a blend of lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship. Liminal entities are "floating signifiers,"[20] which are neither here nor there. They are "betwixt and between the positions" assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony. In a way, they can be called as "critical subjects."[21] Their attributes are "ambiguous and indeterminate" and they are expressed by a rich variety of symbols (Turner: 95).

Relatively, just like dominant academic discourse on caste which constituted a subordinated picture of those outside and marginal to caste and religious space in India, liminal entities too are described by Turner as those who may be disguised as monsters, wear only a strip of clothing, or go naked. Apparently, they must demonstrate as liminal

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[19] *Communitas*, a Latin loan word, has been theorized in Cultural Anthropology and Social Sciences to refer to an unstructured community where people are equal, or to the "spirit" of community. Victor Turner rendered an anthropological use of this term to capture the interplay between social "structure" and "anti-structure." He conceptualized that liminality and communitas are both components of anti-structure in his third chapter.

[20] The phrase "floating signifier" was originally termed by Claude Levi Strauss, so as, to identify "an undetermined quantity of signification, void of meaning and apt to receive any meaning." However, the term was popularized by Stuart Hall's titular speech, "Race: The Floating Signifier?" (1997). "Floating signifier," when applied to concepts such as race and gender, asserts that the word is more concrete than the concept it describes. Hence the concept may not be stable, but the word is. Hence meaning is gained not because what they contain in their essence, but in the shifting relations of difference which is established with other concepts and ideas in a signifying field. Hence like race and gender, caste in the context of Dalit subjectivity, could be argued, as relational and not essential, which cannot be fixed, but is subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation, accordingly (Strauss, 1987).

[21] Jean-François Lyotard used the phrase "critical subjects" to conceptualize citizen subjects in a post-modern condition (Lyotard, 1986:13) and M.T. Ansari uses the phrase to signify the "criticality" of Muslim subjectivity in India in the context of Secularism, Islam and Modernity (Ansari, 2001:18).

beings – having no status, property, insignia, and secular clothing indicating no rank or role or position in a kingship system. Nothing distinguishes them from their fellow-beings. Described as normally passive or humble, they are subjected to and are instructed upon; they accept arbitrary punishment without complaint. As though being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition, they could be "fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable" new life (Turner: 95). Hence, they are described as developing an intense comradeship and egalitarianism. Secular distinctions of rank and status disappear and/or are homogenized.[22]

Turner describes this notion of communitas that is located within liminal entities, as relatively structure-less society that is based on relations of equality and solidarity, which is opposed to a normative, differentiated, hierarchical, social structure. Communitas, hence, gains meaning through the deconstruction of this normative order. It could be projected as an ultimate vision of a culture. However, the striking manifestations of communitas are usually seen in the so called "millenarian religious movements" (Turner: 111) that arise among the uprooted and desperate masses, living on the margins of the structured society. Turner argues that the movement for an open society – communitas – is a phenomenon of transition that is resplendent with mythology and symbolism. They are transiently borrowed from tradition, but also from cultures from which they originate and cultures with which they are in dramatic contact. Accordingly, communitas is distinguished with social structure as marking

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[22] In contrast, Agamben conceptualizes *Homo Sacer* (in Latin, *the sacred man* or *the accursed man*) as a marked and ranked figure in Roman law who as a person is banned – "who may be killed yet not sacrificed" (Agamben, 1998:8). He may be killed by anybody, but may not be sacrificed in a religious festival – a man legally dead but biologically living. He explains that *Homo Sacer* represents, in archaic Roman law, a human life included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed). "He is included … in the form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion." *Homo Sacer* is signified by "the unpunishability of his killing and the ban on his sacrifice" (79). Since, "he is set outside human jurisdiction without being brought into the realm of divine law" (82); he is included in the form of being able to be killed. He could be killed by anybody, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide. *Homo Sacer* is therefore excluded from law itself, while being included at the same time through it.

temporality and movement. "Communitas is of the now; structure is rooted in the past and extends into the future through language, law, and custom" (Turner: 113).

Turner's theory of communitas, as working within liminal entities, is a forceful concept, especially to figure out subaltern communities' ways of negotiating with cultures. However, the possibility that the forceful imagination of a "coming-community" (Agamben, 1993) which is not transitory, but "looks-back" (Wakankar, 2010) at the past, seem to complicate and move away from Turner's contribution in the context of anti-caste and Dalit studies. Hence it is extremely important to discuss significant scholarships on this concept to weave a critical category.

b. COMMUNICATION, WRITING, AND ALTERITY

Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* (1991), a noteworthy work, conceptualizes "community" to propose a thought of "finitude."[23] Nancy explores community as a space, which is different from Turner's understanding of communitas within liminal entities. Nancy suggests that singularity of meaning in multiplicity – "Being Singular Plural" (Nancy, 2000) – forms the political space as the "site of the community" (Nancy, 1991:viii). Nancy argues that an ontological finitude marks the site of community and its thought, and community is to communicate, primarily. He enters a theoretical premise that addresses political practice. He calls for a critique of ideologies that dissimulate and dissemble the absence of community; an attack on the impossibility of communion or immanence. Political practice, he states, informs a

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[23] Nancy follows Heidegger, largely, in assuming that any effort to think of the present presupposes a lucid understanding of philosophy's closure. Hence, he supports that language remains the language of metaphysics, especially, when one speaks of imperatives such as freedom, justice, and community. By extending Heidegger, Nancy marks the gap and the bridge between his political thought and any existent political philosophy on community.

notion of writing. His gesture and thought points to and involves the practice of writing as an alternative political practice.[24]

The thought of the experience of freedom is, therefore, primal to conceptualize community and the experience of freedom is not dissociated from political practice. Nancy terms "alterity" as a concept to figure out the experience of freedom, just like Turner who introduces the idea of liminality, to understand the communitas of the threshold people. Nancy argues that the experience of freedom and, thus, the experience of community is the experience of the real. The individual and the subject's presence are deconstructed, but the singularity of the self opens itself to alterity through writing. Especially, when one experiences an impossibility of communion or immanence, one knows that the community could be an opening in thought for the possibility of meaning.[25] The practice of writing makes this possible. From liminality as performance, one enters the schema of writing as a political practice for alterity.

However, the experience of freedom links the idea of communitas with that of liminal entities, as suggested by Turner. For Nancy, the concept of freedom is linked to ecstasy, which brings forth the "communitary" dimension of experience.[26] Hence, for an articulation of a communitary meaning of free-being, Nancy argues that, a material ground of communication is necessary in the sense of a language. Freedom in this context is definitive and equitable in its access to language. Nancy defines that freedom is the ability to "access the essence of logos" and the "logos in its access to its essence" (xii). However, he twists it a little bit to propagate that logos becomes important in so far as it is articulated by thought. Hence thought is underlined by logos, which

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[24] Perhaps, Nancy already gestures toward an alternative political practice to understand social existence not only as placed in historicity and materiality to comprehend its meaning. Another practice of writing suggests such an alternative political practice and space.

[25] Nancy refers thought as love, where love is a singular experience of freedom, and there is freedom of love.

[26] However, for Nancy, the concept of freedom focuses on the treatment of the motifs of love and death.

ultimately lays the ground for community and communication. Thought in its finitude, Nancy argues, must be exposed to alterity.

Nancy expands the concept "the experience of freedom," and brings to limelight not only the inter-link between thought, logos, language, community, and communication (xi-xv), but also the essence of logos. When language – logos – accesses its essence, it is freedom, for Nancy.[27] The "logos" of the community, therefore, exists only in its communication. Hence its essence, and/or difference, in language is communicated as an intervention of freedom. Hence, Nancy conceptualizes that a free being communicates oneself as an opening to alterity. The sharing of voices, itself, is a "communitary" experience of freedom. Therefore, voice in its relationship with logos, is fundamental for a community in communication, according to Nancy.

Nancy further builds this relationship between community and communication, as he highlights the political and ethical signification of writing. He suggests that a "hermeneutic annunciation" (xxiv) upholds difference of voices for the community, which apparently is a relationship of singular differences through language.[28] Community, hence, lies at the limits of language and is of language. He justifies this by stating that writing is inevitable for a community, otherwise, he contends that there would be no need and no way to write. The act of writing, and its indispensable role in operating a community, is significant in Nancy's theory of community. To exceed the horizon of signification, Nancy argues, it is a necessity to write the community.

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[27] Following the post-structuralist trajectory of thought on language, by "essence of language," Nancy means "difference" in/of language, and not a language of essence or difference. Hence logos, when it accesses the word – its essence – it is an opening to alterity, and it is freedom apparently.

[28] Within Christian theology, "annunciation" is a foretelling immersed in sacrality, particularly the occasion when Mary was told that she was to be the mother of Christ. Conversely, a hermeneutic annunciation, that Nancy refers, implies meaning, explanation, and particularly interpretation. Hence, in this context, it underlines the difference of voices that makes meaning or its limits.

Nancy, also, sophisticatedly implies and implicates that writing itself is a practice of alterity. When a community experiences its own communication, it has a political signification, states Nancy. Hence, he suggests that the thrust to not stop writing lets the singular outline of being-in-common expose itself. The inter-link between writing, communication, and community constitutes the "political" moment of the self-definition of the community. It opens the community to itself, and not to the future or to the destiny. It comes and opens out the limits of the community. Thereby, Nancy states that the law of the community is to enjoin its own dissemination through its own writing by opening out to itself, and its own alterity.

Further, the experience of freedom is a tricky customer in the act of writing the community, or the community of writing. The role of writing is also an activity of freedom in the operation of the community, however, with a slight difference. Freedom, as a concept, is conceived as an experience of articulation. Nancy states that freedom is an articulation of an offering and a reception – the experience of the world as offered, and of existence as a reception. However, what prompts one to write, or articulate, is the desire to call in to question and dismantle everything that blocks access to the communitarian experience. In that, Nancy intensely connects the act of writing to the desire for freedom and access to community. Freedom, thus, is linked to alterity.

Writing forms a symptom of a "unique convergence" (Nancy: xxxvi), which is political. Hence, political is the place where community as such is brought into a free play. Writing and political space give community a specific existence – of being-in-common – which gives rise to the existence of being-self. This mode of exposition – political as it is – is posed towards an alterity. However, Nancy does not advice the thinking of community as essence. In fact, he counters it. Community is a matter of existence, not of essence, being-in-common without being absorbed into a common

substance. Nancy very tritely states that "being-in-common means no longer having, in any form, any empirical or ideal place, such a substantial identity and sharing a 'lack of identity'" (xxxvii).

c. FINITUDE, DEATH, AND COMPEARANCE

A certain finitude is marked while conceptualizing community. It is made by a retreat or a subtraction of something. Community is thus made by what retreats from it. Philosophically linked with religion, this retreat is termed as the "hypostasis." [29] However, to Nancy, this retreat from hypostasis opens, and continues to keep open, the community to which one is exposed. Hence, community is defined as "the immanence of a transcendence of a finite existence;" it is "pre-supposition-less" (Nancy: xxxix). It cannot be pre-supposed but only be exposed. Nancy underlines the importance of characteristic exposition – a finite existence exposed to another finite existence, co-appearing before and with it. Nancy claims that finitude marks such exposition for a community. Hence, hypostasis does not define a community, rather exposition or subtraction that opens characterizes it; Nancy calls it the inoperative community.

Nancy, through a web of ideas, links the notions of individual and community by critically engaging with communism. He is extremely critical of communism as a political form because the individual solidifies at the heart of a thinking of immanence.[30] Nancy argues that communism and modernity remained in its principle humanistic. He is also critical of modern history's role to regain or reconstitute a lost

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[29] The word "Hypostasis" is from ecclesiastical Latin and ancient Greek, which means – sediment, foundation, substance, existence, essence; an underlying state or substance, the fundamental reality or essence that supports all else. As a concept, it means the shared existence of spiritual and corporeal entities that has been used in many religious and intellectual settings.

[30] Nancy argues for a going beyond the idea of community as a closed entity and suggests pursuing the limits of community – "It is the horizons themselves that must be challenged. The ultimate limit of the community, or the limit that is formed by the community, as such, traces an entirely different line. Therefore, even as we establish that communism is no longer our unsurpassable horizon, we must also establish, as forcefully, that a communist exigency or demand communicates with the gesture by means of which we must go further than all possible horizons" (Nancy, 1991:59).

community. He connects a range of thinkers who desired a community which is a consciousness of a lost community. He suggests that thinkers such as Rousseau, Schlegel, Hegel, Bakunin, Marx, Wagner and Mallarme desired a community of communion. Nancy understands such consciousness of a lost community as truly Christian.[31] Community, death, love, freedom, and singularity are names for the "divine" humanity's partaking of divine life. Nancy states that society was not built on the ruins of a community, as Christian consciousness for a recovery of a lost community would like to believe, but community, far from being what society has crushed or lost, is what happens as "question, waiting, event, and imperative" – in the wake of society (11). Loss is constitutive of community, as immanence is constitutive of loss. According to Nancy, such a community of immanence, where human is made equal to God, or to nature, or to his works, is a community of deaths – or of the dead – where death is the infinite fulfillment of immanent life. Nancy forcefully says that this consciousness is superficial.

Intriguingly, Nancy states that death is in-dissociable from community, for it is through death that the community reveals itself, and reciprocally. It is death which reveals the community as a finite reality to its members. He argues that the motif of revelation through death, of being-together or being-with, and of the crystallization of the community around the death of its members – around the loss or impossibility of immanence – all of them lead to a space of thinking which is incommensurable with sociality or inter-subjectivity. This mode of thinking sets apart the thought on inter-subjectivity and envisions a new space for thinking. Community is calibrated on the idea of death, it is revealed in the death of others, hence, it is revealed to others. Nancy

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[31] According to Nancy, Christianity has only two dimensions, contradictory to each other. One that of the *deus absconditus*, where there is a disappearance of the divine, and the other *deus communis* – the God-man, brother of mankind who is an invention of "the familial immanence of humanity," then also of history as "the immanence of salvation" (Nancy, 1991:61).

theorizes that community is what takes place through others and for others revealed by death.

Furthermore, Nancy questions the idea of community as a given identity and describes the limits of such a tradition of thought. He suggests that the death of mortal beings – the finite reality of a genuine community – poses death as community, which in turn establishes an impossible communion.[32] While pursuing such an intriguing subject as death to theorize community, Nancy builds this chain of thought and remarks that community acknowledges and inscribes a peculiar gesture, which is the impossibility of community. He continues, community is not a project of fusion, it is not a productive or operative project. It is the presentation of finitude and the irredeemable excess that makes the finite beings – it presents to its members their mortal truth. It presents birth and death, and its impossibility to relive and cross-over each other.

In this overwhelming stretch of arguments Nancy contends an "originary sociality," that he calls ontological, which in principle, extends far beyond the simple theme of the human as a social being. Nancy's theory on community underlines an important act of community. It means one singular being with another singular being. Finitude by itself, in its singularity, is nothing; Nancy explains that it is neither a ground, nor an essence, nor a substance. However, finitude appears and presents itself. It exposes itself and exists as communication. In fact, finitude co-appears or

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[32] Impossibility is characterized by death, which occupies a singular place. Nancy states that it assumes the impossibility if its own immanence. Therefore, it is implied that the communitarian being in the form of a subject is also impossible.

"compears," as a singular mode of appearing "together"[33] – an attempt to engage with "Being Singular Plural" (Nancy, 2000).

However, Nancy suggests, that communication proceeds before everything else, to foreground sharing and compearance of finitude. Communication of singular entities exposes, shares, and raises a mutual interpellation of singularities prior to any address in language. He treats communication – *com-paraît* – as not a bond; but an originary order than that of a bond. He states that it does not set itself up. It neither establishes nor emerges among already given subjects. However, it consists in the appearance of the "in-between" – where "the subjects are not juxtaposed but exposed" to each other in-between (Nancy, 1991:28).[34]

Building on this fundamental premise of being exposed to the other, communication becomes the constitutive fact for a community. Nancy builds this critical notion of communication to distinguish it from "left-thought." Importantly, he categorizes community as that which cannot be produced, that which cannot arise from the domain of work. One either experiences it or one is constituted by it as the experience of finitude. Giving a specific importance to finitude, Nancy states that community takes place in its "un-working" – that which is before and beyond the work. It withdraws from the work; and no longer is it either related with production or completion. In fact, it encounters interruption, fragmentation, and suspension. He describes community as not the work of singular beings, rather as beings suspended

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[33] "Compears" is *com-paraît* in French. It means appear-together. Nancy states that finitude can only compear. In this formulation, he suggests that one needs to hear that finite being presenting itself together, severally. By which, he elaborates, finitude presents itself as being-in-common and as that finite being itself, at once. He theorizes, mystically, that finitude presents itself at a hearing before the judgement of community as law.

[34] Nancy describes that singular entities are exposed in "compearing" together in the community in communication. They appear in between "I and You," where the conjunction "and" is not juxtaposed but exposed to each other. Nancy states in French – *Toi [e(s)t] [tout autre que] moi [you (are/and/is) (entirely other than) I]*. In fact, he compels in French – *toi partage moi* [*you shares me*] (29).

upon its limits. Hence, communication is the un-working of work that is social, economic, technical, and institutional.

For Nancy, the "political" must inscribe the sharing of the community. It means that a community orders itself to the un-working of its communication. Hence, as a political inscription, a community consciously undergoes the experience of its sharing. Nancy suggests that such an important signification of the political implies writing, where the singular being undergoes the experience of the community as communication. Writing becomes a political act, where writing to and communicating the anguish of the community, and writing from a solitude, invoke a community that no society contains or precedes, even though, Nancy punctuates that every society is implied in it. Writing, therefore, politically un-works the community. Community, according to Nancy, is not a collective subject, but happens only in writing, by sharing itself. Therefore, by exposing the limits, writing makes every singular being share their limits and share each other on their limits.

In a political sense, Nancy conceptualizes community as the exposure of singularities through communication, which is an important philosophical move. He underlines the significance of writing in the idea of community. Writing inscribes the collective and social duration of time at the instant of communication. Hence politically, a community undergoes the conscious experience of its sharing. It offers the "community of writing" through the "writing of community." Nancy attempts to approach community, in a different way from Turner, as a non-religious, non-utilitarian, and un-political exegesis. Perhaps, he offers something very important to the notion of community and concepts such as experience, ethics, and theory. Maurice Blanchot's interesting work, *The Unavowable Community* (1988) is a reflection on Nancy's text, in fact it is an arduous reading of it.

d. EVENT AND ABSENCE

Blanchot poses "what is the idea of community and its possibility?" He suggests perhaps friendship, of all things, is profoundly linked with the possibility of community. And ultimately, in a tragic fashion, he extends Nancy – death, disaster, and absence are at the core of the possibility of community, or its impossibility. He gives a central thrust to the absent community.[35] It is understood as an interface and existence between writing, communication, and community. Blanchot extends Nancy to understand writing as an event – "The tale (récit) is not the narration of an event, but that event itself, the approach to that event, the place where the event is made to happen – an event which is yet to come and through whose power of attraction the tale (récit) can hope to come into being too" (Blanchot: xxii). Writing is work-less-ness, as opposed to operation, for Blanchot. Writing passes and journeys the book, as an event, and is not the destiny of the book. In lot many ways, Blanchot equates writing with community as an event – of that which is to come.

Blanchot also reflects on the failure of communism to create a community. He describes that a society, on Marxist terms – which is built to be equal – is an attempt to become immortal. Blanchot finds fault with the insight that labours to see others as an equal, where differences disappear and the desire to immortality overtakes. Hence, the principle of "negative community," which works with the idea of "incomplete-ness" must orient a community (Blanchot: 6). It interweaves and insufficiently resides in associated differences. He analyzes that a being does not want to be recognized but to

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[35] Blanchot's treatise on community is an arduous reflection on Nancy's theoretical work on community. In fact, "the negative community" as a concept, is a complex interpretation of Bataille, who seem to have offered similar thoughts to both. A close critical alliance between philosophy and community politics offered "politico- moral" stance, so as, to deconstruct the system of communion. Both engaged with Bataille's involvement in creating communities, through writing; facets that were both public and secret: one political which was against Nazism and nationalism, the other a cultural fascination towards Gnostic and heterodox Christian sects. Bataille's tryst to escape the two-pronged trap – Nazism and communism attracted both.

be contested, and it goes to the other to exist. He describes that it composes itself only as it decomposes itself constantly. Marked by the tendency towards a communion of supra-individuality, he says, it is a fusion to give rise to writing.

Blanchot considers two important characteristics that inscribe the impossibility of a communitarian being as a subject and a community. Firstly, he differentiates it with society, entirely. Community, for him, is not the restricted form of a society. And secondly, it differs from a social cell – it does not allow itself to create a work and has no production value as its aim. Accordingly, a theoretical possibility of substitution replaces communion. Blanchot clearly refers writing as an activity that links community with that of alterity.

Apparently, community must be able to reflect itself, thereby, share and let itself be contested. Transgression becomes a defining, illuminating, yet, an affirmative act of community. Blanchot particularly treats ecstasy as an exigency of writing – an urgent need to write. He understands that the object of ecstasy is the negation of the isolated being. Ecstasy, hence, is communication as it works on an extra-temporal memory – a remembrance of a past which has never been lived in the present. Hence, Blanchot forcefully underlines the necessity of a literary community that ordeals effacement. This perfectly suits the notion of community which is an "exposure," primarily of any determination of being-together, to a unilateral and dissymmetrical experience of the other.[36] Through writing and reading as acts of communication, Blanchot suggests, a communitarian experience happens, whereby, it must know itself by ignoring itself. The basis of communication, for Blanchot, is the exposure to the death of the other. By

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[36] Lans Iyer describes Blanchot's notion of community as that which never happens once and for all. It never hypostatizes itself into a positive, fully present institution (Iyer, 2001:59-74).

this, community simultaneously exposes the singularity of oneself, and in turn, exposes one to the community.

For both Nancy and Blanchot writing and reading as communication fundamentally interrupts the community. There is no neutral common space. They evoke the community as a certain sociality that is to come, not in a determined way. For Nancy, the notion of a singular being is finite, in the sense, that it is different from itself, always reliant on the other with whom it co-appears. Hence, his idea of "being" rejects and lacks an absolute – an infinite identity. Similarly, Blanchot offers his view of being as ecstasy. They both resonate the idea of being as/in communication. For instance, ecstasy is nothing if it does not communicate itself. There could be no experience at all if the event were limited to a single individual. For Blanchot, ecstasy is the experience of the self-outside, or besides, itself. Accordingly, insofar as experience is social, it exposes one to the limits of community, which is constituted by a principle of insufficiency and incompleteness.

Nancy and Blanchot have pre-occupied themselves with deconstructing "community" to depict a certain sociality that corresponds to a call for a "commune" that is beyond, or radically other than, the traditional model of community as formed by sovereign individuals and forming a sovereign state.[37] For Blanchot, the "unavowable community" is founded on the radical interruption of ontology signaled by death, whereas Nancy casts ontology itself in an ethical register, thereby allowing a certain

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[37] In connection to Derrida's early essays "Violence and Metaphysics" and "The Ends of Man" where he evoked a "community of the question," it is Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe who formulate the fundamental questioning of the "we" in the West as Derrida's philosophical interrogation of the political (*le politique*), supposedly distinct from politics (*la politique*). However, in a rather erudite manner, Derrida is interested in the "essential" co-belonging of Philosophy and Politics. He highlights the fundamental inter-relationship between the political and politics, rather a division. He suggests what is essentially philosophical is essentially political as it exceeds each other. He implies a political dimension to deconstruction. Gaon incisively analyses the link between the works on community by the three thinkers – Derrida, Nancy, and Blanchot – who lay bare a deconstructive re-thinking of political community (Gaon, 2005:387-403).

solidarity to emerge. Blanchot affirms that both the unavowable community and the relation to the other must be an interruption. For Nancy, an "inoperative community" is a community without essence. It interrupts myth, and the other is s/he to whom one is always "posed in exteriority" – exposed. For both Nancy and Blanchot, the community essentially accentuates singularity. For this reason, one may express that "inoperative" and "unavowable" communities are "communal," but are not communities in a traditional sense.

Accordingly, Stella Gaon argues that Blanchot understands being as a lack against an anterior ethical relation – a relation which is understood as "interruption." However, Nancy appreciates the significance of the relationship between ontology and ethics. Hence, in Nancy's thought, the ethico-political question of community is fully maintained, as he appreciates "the mutual contamination of ethics and ontology" (Gaon: 387). Nancy, hence, offers a more adequate interrogation of community.

Nancy's thought on community can be summed up in comparison and in relation to Blanchot's. Nancy develops sturdily the thought of being as compearance, and to co-appear as the most notable conditions for the possibility of the political. Secondly, community is opposed to work – "oeuvre," and is not related to product or object but to experience. It cannot arise from the domain of work. It is not a work to be done or produced. One experiences it or one is constituted by it as the experience of finitude. It is an infinite task at the heart of finitude.[38] Thirdly, he suggests that singular beings exist only in an "originary sociality," insofar as "finite being always presents

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[38] Nancy describes that "Community is understood as work or through its works would presuppose that the common being, as such, be objectifiable and producible in sites, persons, buildings, discourses, institutions, symbols; in short, in subjects" (31).

itself 'together,' hence severally."[39] He called for a singularity instead of individualism.[40] Fourthly, communication is at the origin of the community as an originary sociality. It consists of constant exposure to an outside, in the sharing with the others all the limits, the borders of finite beings. Nancy states that "Finitude…appears, it presents itself, it exposes itself, and thus it exists as communication" (28). Hence, for Nancy, the political would signify a community disposed to sharing. A community that is conscious of its constitutive, communicative experience.

For Nancy, community becomes inoperative because death signifies impossibility of making a work out of community, or a work out of death. Death disrupts the ontological project of fusion. Hence, an "originary or ontological sociality," which Nancy calls an arche-community, understood as spacing – writing – must have produced community, but which itself can never appear. In contrast, for Blanchot, the theme of death is used for the service of the ethical relation to the other; death founds community. "Death founds community in the sense that death of the other takes me out of myself and this exposes me to the radical alterity of an outside that thought cannot master" (Blanchot: 12). Community, hence for Blanchot, is unavowable.

Vitally, both these reflections on community offer something beyond the traditional model of the social bond. They interrogate community and undo both identity and commonality as such, to open the chance of a political to emerge that is otherwise foreclosed. Beyond or before understanding the social bond as a relationship

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[39] Nancy was troubled by the Nazist and Stalinist dictatorship that enounced "socialist communes" in the garb of totalitarian regimes. He raised doubts philosophically about the political nature of communities. He asked, hugely inspired by Heidegger and Derrida, how the community without essence can be presented as such. What might a politics be that does not stem from the will to realize an essence? (28).
[40] Nancy states – "One cannot make a world with simple atoms…There has to be an inclination or an inclining from one toward the other, of one by the other, or of one to the other. In a world, we co-appear; we compear" (28).

among the previously constituted subjects, they attempt to question, in the ethical-ontological register, the philosophical suppositions of the political.

e. *COMMUNITAS* **AND** *IMMUNITAS*

This theoretical gesture is intrinsically linked with how the oppressed and the Subaltern contextually view and constitute community. The Dalit imagination of the community through textuality – as writing and communication – works in the ethico-ontological register as it attempts to question the philosophical supposition of caste. In that, it fundamentally undoes the presupposition of the social bond, which is constituted through caste-subjection, and attempts to reconstruct community through an ethico-ontological, non-duality. The example of Iyothee Thass' attempt offers significant stimulus to extend such theorization in the colonial South India. Experience as an instituting category for community too, frames this conceptual terrain to underline the links between experience and community.

Both Nancy and Blanchot's theorization on community ideates a departure from the very strong Marxist leanings as well as post-Nazi European academia. The attempt to reinterpret and unpack the definition of community derives from a desire to see beyond the failure of society to emerge in Europe, and to look towards a pre-Christian understanding of the individual and community. Some of the theorists have in fact underlined the importance of discussing community as a political philosophy. In the context of the post-Nazi Europe, and the failure of society to emerge, community as a political and philosophical concept was discussed elaborately.

However, Roberto Esposito's *Communitas* (2010) is a very fresh reading and interpretation – a critical hermeneutics of a kind – that extends, particularly, the debates on Nancy and Blanchot. He foregrounds an etymological study of the term community

to underline the politico-philosophical baggage such an enquiry envisages. Building on the argument that Nancy and Blanchot persevere, Esposito insists that community is not translatable into a politico-philosophical lexicon except by completely distorting or perverting it. He suggests that a radical project undertaken through an etymological exploration of the term may expose that community is not a property that belongs to subjects. Neither is it an attribute nor a predicate that qualifies one as belonging to the same totality. Primarily differentiating the idea of community from communism, he states that it is not a substance that is produced.

Esposito divides the term communitas as *munus* and *itas* which variably means gift, debt, and obligation. He glosses that "communitas is the totality of persons united not by a property but precisely by an obligation or a debt; not by an addition but a subtraction" (6). In this interesting etymological journey, Esposito argues that the complex etymology undertaken demonstrates that the *munus* – debt and gift – that the communitas shares is not a property or a possession. On the contrary, it is a debt, a pledge, a gift that is to be given. Therefore, it will establish a lack. Hence, interestingly, subjects of community are united by an obligation, in the sense that "I owe you something," but not "you owe me something" (6). Accordingly, it expropriates the most proper property – their subjectivity. It is a particular gift distinguished by its obligatory character, where the necessity is to exchange.

Sophisticatedly, Esposito suggests that community cannot be thought as a corporation or a body, where individuals are found in a larger individual. Neither is community an inter-subjective recognition, in which individuals are reflected in each other to conform their initial identity. It cannot be, according to him, a collective bond which at a certain point connect individuals who were separate before. It is also not a mode of being, much less a "making" of subject. It is also not a subject's expansion or

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multiplication. It is to him an exposure – "a dizziness, a syncope, a spasm in the continuity of the subject" (8). The common is not characterized by what is proper but what is improper – by the other, by a voiding to alter oneself. In a dramatic fashion, what is appealing in community is the potentially disintegrating impetus – the lack, the absence, the wanting, the trauma, and the lacuna, not the origin, but its absence and its withdrawal.[41]

Esposito also poses *immunitas* as a contrary or the reverse of communitas, by foregrounding the opposition between community and immunity. Immunitas derives its meaning from a medical-legal language that suggests self-protection and safeguard – like one immunizes oneself against a danger from outside. However, he underlines that the idea of immunity, which is necessary to protect life, when pushed beyond a limit, basically negates it. It at once protects and negates life, in a sense suggesting that protection is negation. Hence, he states that protection, when pushed beyond a certain limit, forces life into a sort of prison. It armours life so heavily that one loses not only freedom, but also the real sense of individual and collective existence. Immunity is posed as opposing the spirit of community, according to Esposito. It limits social circulation and exposure. Through this opposition, Esposito frames communitas as the constitutively exposed character of existence, and not protection. Immunization, for him, brings modernity into existence. It also differently invents modernity as a complex of categories that can solve the problem of safeguarding life.[42]

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[41] Esposito suggests that the exposure to the other may produce the most extreme of its possibilities, which could also be risky. The two faces of communitas that he argues are – it is simultaneously both the most suitable, indeed the sole, dimension of the animal man, but also the most potentially disintegrating impetus for a drift in the meaning of that dimension of the animal man. Hence, for him the constitutive danger of co-living accompanies a cause for a landslide, a threshold that accompanies and which cannot be left behind.

[42] This is proposed from the basic idea that what safeguards the individual and the political body is also that which impedes its development, and beyond a certain point risks destroying it. In fact, Esposito takes inspiration from Benjamin, when he suggests that immunization at high doses entails the sacrifice of the

The category of immunization constitutes the most incisive counter-point to communitas.[43] For Esposito, immunization can be taken as an explicative key of the entire modern paradigm. Therefore, immunitas, for him, is fundamentally opposed to communitas in many ways. Firstly, the immune is not just different from the "common" but, fundamentally, it is its opposite. Secondly, immune completely empties the life out until it is completely left bare, not only of its effects but of its own pre-supposition. And, thirdly, the immunitarian project is not directed only against specific *munus* but it is against any law of associated co-existence. Therefore, Esposito posits that the immunized individual, who assigns services and prices, can no longer bear the gratitude the gift demands.

In a radical rupture and critique with the Hobbesian social contract theory, just as Guru had criticized earlier, Esposito posits that the "perfectly, absolute individual" (14) is isolated and protected, thereby, freed from the "debt" that binds him/her to community. He argues that through immunization, they are released from, exonerated, and relieved of the contact, which threatens and exposes them to the contagion of the relation with others. It negates the very foundation of community. In a way, Esposito forcefully states that the social contract creates a juridical figure against communitas. The contract, hence, is not embodied by "gift," it is its absence; "the neutralization of

living, of every qualified form of life, motivated just by simple survival; in turn, life itself would be reduced to its simple biological layer. It may promote devastating autoimmune diseases where the excess of defence and the exclusion of those elements that are alien to the organism turn against itself, with potentially lethal effects, fears Esposito. However, he suggests that "it is precisely the in dissolvable, negative, relation with communitas that opens a possibility of a positive, communitarian reconversion of the same immunitary dispositive." However, sovereignty, property, liberty – modalities that are linguistic and conceptual - safeguard individual and collective life negatively. This immunitary method that is primarily medical is converted into a philosophical/juridical discourse (Campbell and Paparcone, 2006:49-56).

[43] The concept of immunitas against communitas should be put into perspective. In many ways, it is how they counter-view life and death. In many ways, for Esposito, death seems to mark a significant trope to found a community. The "gift of life" is offered in communitas in the communitarian archetype of the last supper. He argues that the first fratricidal violence inevitably refers to "every future founding of community." Therefore, the human community founding process is in close contact with the idea of death, which he terms as "a society from and with the dead." Communitas seems to "defer the gift of life at the unbearable abduction of the fear of death" (Esposito, 2010:11).

its poisonous fruits" (14) – the religion.[44] Immunitas is governed by life that is preserved through the presupposition of its sacrifice.

f. DEATH

Esposito lastly engages with Heidegger and Bataille about the "end of philosophy" and "non-knowledge" to foreground how experience can be understood as co-relative to community (115-116). In the context of the Dalit experience and their notion of community and writing, this discussion is relevant. Experience is understood as a "voyage," something that is traversed and undertaken, but without a destination and no return. He equates experience as "what carries the subject outside of itself" (Esposito: 117).[45] Esposito engages with Bataille to argue that when the subject finds it difficult to present before itself – that is, with the "un-presentablility of the subject to itself" (119) – experience connects with the idea of community. Experience, therefore, coincides with community insofar as the subject cannot present to itself. Here, communication is necessitated primarily because of a lack. This lack separates the self from itself. It is this lack that puts one to communicate, in the first place, with what one is not – the other.

In a very radical gesture, Esposito recommends that "experience attains in the end the fusion of object and subject" (120). The suggestion that there is no subject without the other underlines that separate existence stops communicating; in fact, it

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[44] Esposito considers Hobbes' *Leviathan* state as having a singular problem with communitas. He suggests that this phenomenal work on political philosophy coincides with "the breaking of every communitarian bond, with the squelching of every social relation that is foreign to the vertical exchange of protection-obedience." He exposes "the bare relation of having no relation" in social contract, where people live in and of their refusal to live together, which paradoxically is related with immunitas, where life is sacrificed for its preservation.

[45] Esposito compares Bataille's notion of experience with Walter Benjamin's in "Experience and Poverty" to foreground the argument on "experience of poverty" and "experience as poverty." Benjamin's work is used to argue that experience is what carries the subject outside itself. And for this reason, Esposito argues, there cannot be a subject of experience. The only subject, then, is experience, but it is the experience of the lack of every subjectivity (Esposito: 116).

withers by itself and does not exist. Arguing that separation collapses in the continuum of community, Esposito states that "truth has its place only in the movement from one to the other" (120). Hence, he paradoxically suggests that the individual desires what he fears – the other. The desire for community is the desire for communication and that is life. This desire is configured as the negation of life, when the desire is to communicate with the other as a necessity. He foregrounds that one is annihilated into the emptiness of an isolated life by not communicating, while by communicating one risks being destroyed.

Interestingly, for Bataille, community is existence's excessive and painful extension of death. He understands that it is death that holds us within the horizon of the common, and not life. Bataille states that "death is our common impossibility of being what we endeavor to remain, namely, isolated individuals" (cited in Esposito: 121). Death becomes an experience which cannot be experienced individually but one shares it with the other. Death is the extreme limit of our experience. Hence, the death of the other, Esposito poses, or any death, returns us to our own death. The death of the other directs us to the nature of every death which is made incapable of being made properly one's own.

g. NO-THING OF COMMUNITY: PROPOSITIONS

In a radical "conclusion" of sorts, Esposito studies the thought on community by relating it with Nihilism, and evaluating both Heidegger and Bataille. He underlines the importance of works, such as Nancy's, to explore the meaning of "no-thing in common" along with "being-toward-the-world" to suggest a theory of communitas.[46]

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[46] Often, thoughts on community and nihilism have had contrasting relationships between them. Generally, nihilism is thought as that which makes community impossible or even unthinkable, states Esposito. Community, he explains, has always been interpreted as that which "resists, contains, and opposes such a nihilist drift." Taking a cue from Ferdinand Tönnies important work, Esposito argues that

The concept of "no-thing" which is common to community and nihilism, Esposito argues, has gone largely unexamined in the neo-communitarian approach to thought. He comes up with multiple definitions of community, differentiating with those conceptions which have defined it either as property that is collectively owned by a totality of individuals or by their having a common identity. Firstly, but pertinently, community is not joined to an addition, but by a *subtraction of subjectivity*. Members are no longer seen as identical with themselves. They are understood as constitutively exposed to a propensity that forces them to appear as what is "outside" themselves. Hence, the subject of community will no longer be the same. Esposito clarifies that it will be by necessity an "other," not another subject but "a chain of alterations" (138) that cannot be fixed in a new identity.

Secondly, community is not a thing – in the absence of subjectivity, of identity and of property. Esposito explains that it is defined, precisely, by its "non." "No-thing" is not a pure negation of "the thing," as he explains that it belongs even more intensely to the thing. The no-thing of communitas is not teleology or pre-supposition. Hence, Esposito proposes that it must neither be about past nor future. No-thing is simply about its "simple present" (Esposito: 135). He states that no-thing is community's only mode of being. Constituted by its no-thing, community is understood as not an entity, not a collective subject, not a totality of subjects. It is a *relation* that makes it no longer individual subjects. Importantly, it alters and traverses the subject from itself.[47]

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it is pertinent to bring together community and nihilism in a unitary thought just to witness, in the realization of nihilism, instead of an unsurmountable obstacle to community, a new way of thinking about community. In this effort, Esposito comes up with an account of thought-provoking appendages on community, as an after-thought, in the form of "appendix" and not as conclusion to the book (Esposito: 135-149).

[47] The subject-being in communitas, as constituted and defined by its non-thing, is understood much clearly as being –"with" and "between." It is described as the threshold where the subject meets its other. That point of contact that brings the subject into a relation with others, and to the degree to which it

Thirdly, the being of community is suggested as the interval of *difference*. It is a specific spacing that brings one into a relation with others in a common "non-belonging" (Esposito: 139). Here, the common is strictly proposed as only a lack, not possession, property or appropriation.[48] Extending which, fourthly, community is the exteriorization of what is within, claims Esposito. He argues that community is never a point of arrival, but always one of *departure*. Hence, he strongly proclaims that communitas is incapable of producing effects of commonality, of association and of communion. However, it fundamentally exposes – to lose one's individuality. It dissolves the borders that guarantee the inviolability of the individual with respect to the other. Hence, it also risks one to suddenly fall into the nothing of anything – it might dissolve the relation to its absoluteness of having no relation.[49] These arguments reflect a basic correlation with Buddhist conceptualization of a self-less being.

Interestingly, if this argument is extended, the question of representation could be problematized thoroughly. For instance, Esposito argues that the subjects who are reunited in the communal chain would recognize that the access to their condition of possibility is only found in their reappropriation of their own communal essence. In a way, such a condition reproduces and strengthens the communal essence. This appears to be configured as the "fullness of a lost origin," which can be rediscovered in the "interiorization of an existence that is momentarily made exterior" (Esposito: 143).

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separates them from themselves, as an interesting paradox. Being is, hence, understood as a relation-with and between the other (Esposito: 139).

[48] Esposito had elaborately explored the etymological meaning of the term munus. He links it here as a gift that is simultaneously made and received. Hence, he suggests that the being in communitas not only undergoes: "con-vergence, con-version, con-fusion"; but also, importantly, it undergoes: "di-vergence, di-version, and dif-fusion" (Esposito: 141).

[49] This has serious implications for Hobbesian prosthesis and the thoughts on representation. Esposito states that the Hobbesian prosthesis compensates an extreme void, so as, to only reproduce and strengthen the void. The principle of representation, which is conceived as a formal mechanism to confer presence on the one absent, does nothing to conceptualize the originary character of its presence, Esposito argues. He says that the representative subject is so folded in on itself that it continuously reduces each one to another. This is so similar and parallels the context on the discourse of reservation and representation.

This realization of "thing"[50] as the communal essence, becomes an objective for totalitarianism, so argues Esposito.

As an interesting paradox, Esposito states that one is structurally exposed to and constituted by a condition that would help flee annihilation by implosion and, at the same time, risk destruction through explosion. Hence, he makes an argument for communitas – communication. "Lacerated and suspended, perched atop a common nothingness," two people should risk themselves to communicate (Esposito: 147). Esposito foregrounds communitas as the sense of being-toward-the-world, echoing Nancy.

Hence, finally, community is the border and the point of transit in-between the immense devastation of meaning. It is a no thing-other-than-the-world, which is a planetary world without direction. Therefore, resistantly, it is a singular and plural existence that is free from every meaning that is presumed, imposed or postponed. It is capable of being what it is. It is this no-thing that is held in common that is the world, which conditions the exposure. It simultaneously exposes one to the most unyielding absence of meaning and, also, to that opening to a meaning that remains un-thought.

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[50] In fact, taking cue from Heidegger, Esposito argues that there is nothing to be rediscovered because it was never lost. He states that what appears lost is no-thing out of which the thing is constituted in its communal dimension. For Esposito, it was Heidegger who searched for the community in the no-thing of the thing. The thing, referred to communal essence, inconspicuously withdraws itself from thought, in the most stubborn of ways, he extends. In an essay titled "The Thing" (1971), Heidegger states that void is the essence of things as it is of all things. Hence, the essence of the thing is nothingness: "in truth, the thing as thing remains proscribed, nil, and in that sense annihilated." The annihilation of essence, its character resides in the void. Hence, he suggests, "the nothing that it places in common and the community of nothing as the essence of the thing" (Esposito: 145). Further, Esposito argues that Bataille adds on to Heidegger to claim that individuals must risk themselves, and break their separate existences, placed at the limit of death and nothingness. Communication, for him, cannot proceed from one full and intact individual to another (Esposito: 146).

COMMUNITARY EXPERIENCE AND EXPERIENTIAL COMMUNITY

In this context, it is also important to reflect, how such a theorization on community,[51] in the west – especially in the anti/post Nazist and Stalinist world – is relevant and linked to the discussions on (lived) experience, space, caste, untouchability and community. *The Cracked Mirror* (2012), as discussed earlier, undertook an archaeological labour, where a method to excavate the mind-set that endorses caste was sought to discuss the everyday experience of caste and its unspoken nature. Wakankar states that the book seeks a new conceptuality to counter caste. It attempts to describe an undisclosed, secretive region/space for the conscious mind, where caste is predominant. However, he suggests that this region of concepts precedes the lived domain of Hindu Brahminical law. Hence, he balances a critical relationship between what is seen as uniquely individual as Dalit (the not-to-be-touched), and an individuality that is paradoxically tied to the universal – that which guarantees a moral hegemony for Dalits.

The counter-positions that are imagined and articulated by Subaltern communities in varied contexts are really an aspiration towards a moral hegemony. In fact, as a matter of activity it is best created through writing – they are imaginaries created by Subaltern communities not only against oppression. They propound "annihilation," yet, they do not fall into another order of suppression. In this context, conversely, emancipatory imaginaries are not probably only about "dying," they do not

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[51] It is indeed instructive to register that it was the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies who provided one of the earliest focus on the study of community as *gemeinschaft* differentiating it from society or association as *gesellschaft*. He suggested that the sphere of community involves small-scale, face-to-face relations against a broader sphere in the context of industrialization, urbanization, and city – in other words modernity. For Tönnies community maintained values of kinship and co-operation, which were questionably eroded in the wake of society which was increasingly rule-bound and inflexible. This perspective remains one of the dominant ones in modern social and political theorization of community (Little, 2002:16-17). Nancy, more than once, has referred to the Nazist leanings and commitment to a *volk* theory of community such as *gemeinschaft* – which apparently shares a lot with Gandhi's conceptualization of *Ram Rajya*.

look towards death. They envision a possibility towards life as well, a better one. They do set up a moral hegemony to annihilate a certain oppressive order. This is well suggested in the debates on experience and community.

For instance, *The Cracked Mirror* suggests an idea of experience which is "shared apart," but which is no longer an "apartness" to desire a moral community (Wakankar, 2013:405). The critical engagement brings to light that the Dalit and non-Dalit, though they stand-apart in their caste location, stand-forth together on the earth. This suggests a creative "co-temporal," a "co-appearance" and a "co-original" coming-forth together as "chthonic" (Wakankar, 2013:405) – ambivalent *aporias* that are characteristic of the politics of identity. It is in such context that spatial and experiential hermeneutics against caste moves towards a Dalit conceptualization of communitas in the form of writing and compearance. This is well expressed in the Dalit conceptualization of religion – particularly in the explorative writings on Buddhism as exscription.

In a suave engagement on the "questions of community," in the context of Islam in South India, M.T. Ansari uses the concept – community as a site – to debate on a post-secular possibility in "our search for a post-human human" (56) condition via a post-modern understanding of religion (Ansari, 2016:55-69). For this purpose, he appreciates Nancy's characterization of community as resistance against immanence itself, and uses it to read Islam in a different way in the global and local context. He suggests that the Arabic terms *qaum* and *ummah*, in relation to *communis* or *munus*, could explore the notions of belonging to a community in the contexts of secular enchantment (57). One could add that the terms *sangam* and *sabha*, which were explored by Tamil Dalits, would work alike as the noun community against caste in the vernacular. Ansari further engages with Nancy, Blanchot, Bataille, Esposito and

Agamben to suggest that Islam in South India, during the colonial and nationalist context, enabled one to "belong to a world-community and at the same time grapple with issues besetting their local communities" (57). He argues, following Blanchot, that Islam inscribes a negation and an affirmation whereby it becomes both a traditional and an elective community at once (57).

In the context, where nationalist historiography continues to reaffirm India as Hindu, and Islam continues to be represented as inimical to the nation, Ansari argues that "Muslims in India are emblems of a lack … as well as an excess, due to their perceived extra-territorial affiliation to the community of Islam" (180). Pan-Islamism, he argues, allows Muslims to live as minor subjects within various socio-cultural and political formations. However, in the context of caste, and the kind of violent immunization that it does to the body, mind, space and time, perennially, to the most oppressed, could Dalits belong to a world-community and a local community at once? Or would they annihilate to create a shared world in which they could commune – a simultaneous negation and affirmation?

Also, when Dalit claims on any ancestry and descent are denied, not only are they culturally isolated from social heritage, but they are "a genealogical isolate" (Patterson, 1982:5). In turn, they must reach-for and "look-back" to the past, not as a heritage, but to evaluate caste as a text to produce textualities of anti-caste. As discussed in the first chapter, recent research on Dalits' engagement with religion conceptualized a possibility of a community against caste. Dalits produce caste-less textualities not only as a veritable battle about the past, but also as an expressive aspiration for a caste-less future. It is to re-fashion a genealogy of thought which integrates experience, understands social inheritances and anchors the living present

with a conscious community of memory, while tracking an alternative dissenting lineage for a *post-caste* space and time.

This conceptualization of a caste-less community by Dalits would be surely different from the way scholars have attempted to argue for a "community in the east" (Chatterjee, 1998:277-282).[52] It would not be a forceful response to pitch in a tussle between the forces of modern individualism and those of traditional primordiality. Nor would it uncritically propose, without a glimpse into history, that "the traditional community structures have more effective civilizational resources than the institutions of the modern state" (Chatterjee: 278). It would rather state that caste is built on the ruins of the civilizational community and self-hood. In the context of the Subaltern groups' – particularly the most oppressed – engagement with modernity and technology in the early twentieth century, it would rather suggest a meaningful and transformative appeal to community, beyond it being just a "demographic material" for a determinate enumeration (Chatterjee: 280).

Instead of just romanticizing and stereotyping that the marginalized groups could survive because the traditional structure of community – say caste in South Asia – has imaginatively collaborated with modern emancipatory rhetoric of autonomy and equal rights, this thesis would state that caste is civilizational violence. Scholars have argued that caste is "necessarily a relationship that is determined by violence," criticizing studies that essentializes and constructs it as a discourse for nationalist

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[52] Interestingly, to conceptualize "community in the east," Partha Chatterjee argues that the liberal-individualist and communitarian debates that have dominated the debates in western political theory can now rest in the wake of "eastern modernity" and the writing of eastern political theory. In a post-colonial spirit to critique the indifferences of "western political theory" on non-western societies (Chatterjee, 1998:274), he states that caste and religion in India, ethnic groups in south-east Asia, and tribes in Africa have remained the dominant criteria for identifying community as objects of modern policy (280). Despite having examples of feminist literature, anti-race, anti-caste, and minority studies that explore and explode violence as category, Chatterjee foregrounds an essentialist and constructionist framework to draw comparative parallels with "western" theory to float a theory of community in the "east." This research, however, is least concerned about such an orientation.

Humanities and Social Sciences (Muthukkaruppan, 2017:49).[53] Violence, apart from merely understood as a secondary manifestation of caste, foregrounds untouchability and it is to be stated that caste itself is a subject constituting violence. Hence, Guru's archaeological method, discussed earlier in the chapter, importantly aims at uncovering the secret of caste that lies at the bottom of the experience. This explosive opening character has a political thrust and a theoretical move – an approach that put to use experience, space and touch through a psychological fashion, where the will is engineered toward a *certain* end.

However, would this framework that lays importance to experience and community be enough to make sense of the expansive archive of materials – historical, cultural, religious, and critical theory – which suggest a positional critique of belonging and being that is embodied through caste? In what ways does Subaltern thought – Dalit and the oppressed – reconfigure notions of space and time that is open, creative and resistant that permeates an anti-caste way to think about ethics and ontology? Would this have relevance, as critique, for the rampant violence and humiliation that oppressively institutionalise the body and mind every day?

Wakankar suggestively states that the ontological lexicon of Dalit life, with a perceptual experience that balances the in-between of the empirical and the ideal, provide a wherewithal. Dalit thought, he says, abnegates and espouses a mode of self-conduct as an ethico-political imperative. A Dalit conceptuality that guides to live in and amid an "unprecedented incipience" (Wakankar, 2013:406) – a beginning unmatched. This incipience is neither already, nor is yet-to-be. Though it is born in

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[53] Parthasarathi Muthukkaruppan launches a critique, as the first chapter of this thesis does, on ideas of caste prevailing in the Social Sciences to state that caste is not a thing but a relationship. Violence is its ideological thrust. He explains that caste is an ensemble of relationships determined and reproduced by three kinds of violence, namely – physical, symbolic, and structural (Muthukaruppan, 2017:49-71).

negativity, however, it goes on to affirm what is not yet. Such is the Dalit conceptual incipience, suggests Wakankar. In fact, research should move on to interrogate and question the primordial caste encryption of the subject itself – even prior to the era of the modern caste subject, so as to expose its secrecy and politics. Hence, intellectuals such as Iyothee Thass researched for a post-caste condition in the past; caste-less-ness in *pre-caste* space and time.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

This chapter wove a conceptual framework on community to study Iyothee Thass and the pre-Ambedkarite anti-caste thought. It discussed imperative works on Dalit theory and studies, especially that of Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai. Community as a concept was explored – particularly in the philosophical works of Nancy, Blanchot, and Esposito – to discuss a feasible method to study texts by Dalits within the field of ontology and epistemology. These philosophies explored the notions of community in the west, where society was criticised in the context of fascism, Nazism, and totalitarianism. However, in India, the context of Hinduism as a political marker and caste as its cultural marker calls for a critical exploration of community as a concept. Caste and Hinduism work with the identities of one's birth which in turn mark the society. Is a Dalit communitas, with caste-lessness at its core, as an originary sociality impossible and unavowable? Communitas is a serious concept to explore in the context of Dalit thought and experience.

The next chapters study Iyothee Thassa Pandithar (Iyothee Thass) as a discourse and a critique in such a proposition. His texts on Tamil Buddhism are contextualized within the trajectory of anti-caste social movements, driven by the journalistic-print and publications, Dalit migration to presidential cities, industrial towns, railway quarters

and military cantonments as well as the indentured labour migration to countries such as Burma, South Africa, Ceylon and South-East Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The last chapter weaves the concept anti-caste "communitas" as a textual possibility in the writings of Thass, who explored a creative "hermeneutic." These writings foreground alterity, compearance, communitas and caste as no-thing to compete against powerful hermeneutics of caste "immunitas" in the colonial period. Even under displacement and disembodiment, the Dalits conceptualized space-less and time-less communitas "in-place" and "in-time" – which is filled with anti-caste values. Hence, Thass's texts would be conceptualized as foregrounding a caste-less communitas in writing.

CHAPTER THREE

IYOTHEE THASS AS HISTORICAL DISCOURSE AND CRITIQUE

The previous chapters discussed that a study on the twentieth century Dalit-Subaltern intellectual thought must ideally foray into the ideas on community. This has an inherent link with the act of writing, and it wields a theory of religion from an anti-caste viewpoint. The first chapter discussed caste and religion as categories, which proposed a conceptual terrain to conceive a Dalit anti-caste positionality on religion. The theoretical journey of ideas that the previous chapter explored could help formulate an anti-caste positionality on religion.

This chapter lays out the studies and history of Tamil Dalits in the nineteenth and twentieth century, discussing how Dalits engaged with colonial modernity and religion in South India, so much so, they developed a viable critique of caste. Secondly, a discursive analysis of Thass as a product of the intellectual and political climate of the late 1990s in South India is attempted. Thass largely remained within the intellectual discourse of the Tamil public sphere during this time. After a stint of ten long years of discussion, he was shunned again to oblivion. But for relentless efforts by Aloysius to bring the writings of Thass into the public limelight and Ayyathurai's research study in Columbia University, in the field of historical anthropology, Thass' writings remain only as untouchable documents of civilizational violence. They are not seen as resources that fundamentally offer a creative and critical hermeneutic that breaks the epistemology and ontology of caste. Largely, he is now a forgotten figure amongst the ensnared density of popular figures in the twentieth century Tamil public sphere.

In this context, as discussed in the first chapter, important academics studied Dalits and anti-caste movements across the country. However, in the Tamil intellectual and political scenario, there was a serious search for figures who precede the Dravidian movement. The increase of caste violence against Dalits post-1990s, coupled by the intellectual and political vacuum that a global Dalit movement created on a post-Dravidian present, indeed, paved way to search for a pre-history. This rediscovery brought to light the true foundations of anti-caste in the Tamil public sphere. Thass was literally rediscovered through optimal research and work by steadfast intellectuals, activists, and academics. This also signifies the epistemological and ontological emptiness that Dalits felt by the end of the twentieth century after a fifty-year Dravidian regime.

After a stellar career during the early twentieth century, Thass was rediscovered recently – in the late 1990s – from the shadows that loomed large in the aftermath of the late twentieth century social movements. Thass' rediscovery is a result of pivotal Dalit movements across the country, much so particularly in the South, in the late 1990s. Aloysius's *Religion as an Emancipatory Identity* (1998), Geetha and Rajadurai's *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium* (1998), Pandian's *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin* (2007), and Ayyathurai's *Foundations of Anti-Caste Consciousness* (2011) in English; and Gowthaman's *Ka. Iyothee Thassar Aaivugal* (*K. Iyothee Thassar's Research*, 2004), Dharmaraj's *Naan Poorva Bouddhan* (*I'm an Ancient Buddhist*, 2007), and Rajangam's *Vaazhum Bouddham* (*Living Buddhism*, 2016) in Tamil are particularly phenomenal in creating Thass as a discourse and critique.[1]

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[1] Aloysius, Geetha, and Rajadurai are independent scholars who have written extensively on the anti-caste, Dravidian, Non-Brahmin and Self-Respect movements. Pandian (late), a historian and academic, has also contributed in this field. Ayyathurai is a Historical Anthropologist based in Germany who works on Iyothee Thass and the Tamil Buddhist movement. Gowthaman, Dharmaraj, and Rajangam are Tamil scholars and writers based in Tamil Nadu.

This chapter introduces Thass and discusses the studies on him. This would serve as a back drop to particularly analyse Thass' texts on Buddhism. Some pertinent questions would orient this chapter. What was Thass as a discourse in the works of Aloysius, Geetha and Rajadurai, Pandian, Bergunder, and Ayyathurai who wrote in English, and Dharmaraj, Gowthaman, and Rajangam who wrote in Tamil? How did Thass' use of religion, particularly Tamil Buddhism, pave a viable anti-caste critique within the vernacular cosmopolitan? This chapter, hence, suggests that at the level of epistemology, Dalits used writing and reading as acts for a community to come. Thass and his contemporaries' efforts, hence, need a historical re-look when placed in the long nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Madras presidency.

DALITS, MODERNITY, AND DISPLACEMENT IN NINETEENTH CENTURY SOUTH INDIA

> An ideal society should be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts … There should be *varied and free points of contact* with other modes of association. In other words there must be *social endosmosis* (Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, emphasis mine).

Historical studies on Dalits (Basu, 2010; Viswanath, 2014; Mohan, 2015) state that continuous displacements among the out-castes had destroyed an essential notion of human as a unique space – as identity – for pressing historical reasons. A-place-at-home was vulnerable to violence and intimidation, and the human as a unique space was denied. Hence outcastes had to move in and out of places, mostly with their families in large numbers, in search of a home and livelihood. Men and women migrated and worked together. Differences among the marginalized were rejected in the

enslaving gaze of both the colonial and local masters. They were reduced to a unified comportment of shadows. Produced only as shadows, they were sought to be distanced. Apparently, the real and the reflected space – body and shadow – became one and the same. In other words, even in travel, the out-caste body as a unique body in presence is rejected, and is reduced to a not-yet-space, which does not embody a unique human presence in relation with the other.

For instance, historian Raj Sekhar Basu studies the migration pattern of the Paraiyar community, formerly "untouchables," in Tamil Nadu during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in his work *The Nandanar's Children* (2010).[2] He historicizes their "search for fresh pastures" (111) through internal and overseas migration that was accelerated by the colonial governance. He contends, by accounting historical resources that large populations migrated as indentured labourers to Ceylon, Malaya, Burma, Fiji, Mauritius, South Africa, and to some of the French colonies from early nineteenth century to late twentieth century. Dalits migrated in large numbers and an essential sense of self was not fixated.

The large number of migrants, who were Tamil coolies, belonged mostly to the "untouchable" and "lower" caste backward communities. They travelled to work in the tea estates and plantations. The large-scale migration by these communities was a huge recruitment network that worked across countries and sea routes, which tremendously consolidated the local as well as the colonial configuration of power through violent authority on face value.

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[2] *Nandanar's Children* is one of the very few scholarships in Indian Social History, which studies a Dalit community's mobility during the colonial period in India. A chapter titled "Search for Fresh Pastures: Overseas and Internal Migration Patterns of the Tamil Paraiyans in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries" brilliantly recounts and captures the colonial "travels," or displacement of the Tamil Parayars (Basu, 2011:111-164).

Basu notes that people migrated internally to the emergent industrial towns such as Mysore and Madras. Moreover, a large section of Parayars also joined as soldiers in the Madras army since the 1760s and 1770s. They were more popularly known as the "Queen's Own Sappers and Miners" (Basu: 161). But after the 1857 revolt, Basu mentions that the colonial government's military recruitment policy changed drastically, and it went against the Parayar regiment. The government did not involve in the religious matters of India, say recruiting "untouchables." However, as late as the 1890s, Parayars enjoyed a virtual monopoly of the dangerous yet menial jobs as "Sappers and Miners" in the Madras army (Basu: 159-161).

Indeed, hardly any historical research is found that is completely devoted to study the links between the army and the mobilization of the "lower-caste" groups in pre-independent India. Manas Dutta concurs that though the army played an important role in the lives of the Dalits as a means of immense social and occupational mobility, "very little work has been done on the role of the 'marginalized' or 'untouchable' or 'labourer castes' in the army" (Dutta, 2016:58). He argues that the Madras army, amongst the three presidency armies, particularly maintained the policy to make the army a viable ladder for social mobilization for caste groups that were in need (57-71). He points out that the Madras army consisted mainly of low-caste Hindus, untouchables, and converted Christians who were particularly noted for "the lack of religious prejudices and local attachments" among others (61). This exclusive preferential policy to recruit untouchables as soldiers earned the Parayars an important place in the army.[3] They incorporated themselves in the colonial army not only to

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[3] The colonial army during the second half of the eighteenth century started to form an army establishment in the South, which served both the Parayars and the British. The Parayars since the 1760s and 1770s had constituted the bulk of the foot soldiers in the company army. They found employment in the following years as military depots started functioning from Madras and Trichinopoly (Dutta, 2016:64). Significantly, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, the recruitment in the British army brought about important changes in the self-perceptions of the Parayar soldiers (Basu, 2011:160).

explore their physical ability but also to earn maximum respect in the society (Dutta: 62). As Dalits deserted the lands and farms, many more landlords complained bitterly that their "agrestic slaves" had enlisted as sepoys in the company army. Further, Madras as a colonial town began to grow and the prospect of urban employment increased, particularly to the "lower castes" (Dutta: 63).

As Madras emerged as a presidential city, Dalits also became menial servants of the British. In this attempt, "they escaped agrarian bondage and ritual degradation." Indeed, "Parayars and Pallars became butlers, cooks, attendants, keepers of horses, etc. They were employed in Buckingham and Carnatic Mills, Kolar gold mines, the expanding railways, the constructional and transport sectors in and around Madras." Particularly, "British army's military adventures across the globe enabled the Parayars to cross the seas and work as British soldiers." Thus, "they travelled all over the world bringing home not only money, but also new ideas, values, and determination" (Aloysius, 1998:34-64).

They were also the first to be recruited as manual labourers in the Railways for construction work. In fact, huge deployments were sent to Burma, Uganda, and America; many died and some never returned. They worked in Kolar Gold Field, tanneries, leather factories, Ice Houses, tea estates, and plantation farms in deplorable conditions during the colonial period. Many worked as cooks and ayahs to British officers and Christian missionaries. Dutta mentions that they worked as "menial domestic servants" such as – "butlers, butlers' mates, cook's mates, roundel boys, coach men, palanquin boys, house keepers, grass cutters, dry and wet nurses, water

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Serving the company's army provided the Parayars an opportunity to experience the civic equality enjoyed by other subjects of the company. The performance of military rituals and drills instilled in them the idea of belonging to a martial race. The prestige associated with a military uniform paved way to hope that all forms of caste discrimination, the bonds of exploitation and servitude would be eliminated. Dutta argues that these important changes in their engagement with the British army revolutionised the social and political outlook of most of the untouchable castes in the country (65).

wenches, scavengers, cart drivers, tots, women sweepers, and lamp lighters" (70). They were, perhaps, the foot soldiers of a colonial modernity – probably similar but not congruent to "conscripts"[4] of civilization and/or modernity (Diamond, 1974; Asad, 1992; Scott, 2004) – that marched for three centuries in the Indian subcontinent, though worst affected by it. They were neither recognized for their contribution nor given claim over these material spaces of industrial modernity, as social justice and recognition were denied to them historically. However, this calls for a separate research all together.

These changes during the colonial period caused "an exorbitant change in values and attitudes back home." The Dalits entry into education was largely assisted through "the missionaries, the early theosophist society, and the provincial government." The urban educated Dalits took up "the cudgels on behalf of their less fortunate brethren by organizing themselves" through social organizations and movements. This is reflected in "the emergence of newspapers and journals," which was one of the favourite media of the emerging Subalterns. Printing presses, which I discuss elaborately in the fourth chapter, seem to have become "the centres for discussions, planning, and collective activities." They created "the myth-histories of the Subaltern communities" appear in the public, and created their own print-world as a social and political space (Aloysius, 1998:98-125).

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[4] The term "conscript" refers to someone who is compulsorily enrolled or drafted for service. The phrase "conscripts of civilization" was used by the eminent anthropologist Stanley Diamond. He refers it to the "primitive" cultures that engage in the "civilization" project becoming "conscripts of civilization, not volunteers" (Diamond, 1974:204). This is, however, a unilateral view. Although large populations under colonialism could be understood as conscripts, the case with some – like Dalits – seems to have been complex, critical, voluntary, and engaging as suggested in the first and second chapters. Therefore, though the conditions could be theorized as conscripts, but the content is not congruent and agreeable to the same.

It is in this context that the late nineteenth century witnessed opening-up of "Buddhist medical halls, Buddhist colleges, Buddhist young men associations, celebrations of Buddha's birthday anniversaries, and a Buddhist charity fund to feed the poor" through the Sakya Buddhist society and Mahabodhi society. The Dalits had started "a new and autonomous religio-social movement right in the centre of the city of Madras" (Aloysius, 1998:57). They had expressed the opinion that the emancipation of their community members could be successfully achieved by organizing a Buddhist mass movement. The idea of a mass movement for accomplishing social emancipation was developed by Thass and his trusted followers G. Appadurai – an activist, and P. Lakshmi Narasu – a professor (Basu: 181). The movement had started branches in Bangalore, Royapettah, Pudupet, Adyar, and Mylapore with the help of railway employees and enlisted army personnel, especially from Queen Victoria's own Madras sappers and miners.[5] They also opened branches where the Subaltern groups migrated as indentured labourers in the over port Natal in South Africa and Eticola, Rangoon in Burma. The postal services, railways, and the journal print that were made available by colonial modernity were effectively used to promote unity and carry forward the movement.[6]

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[5] During Thass' time, Mysore and Kolar Gold Field particularly played a very significant role in not only spreading Buddhism but also to start many educational ventures. Dalits in Kolar Gold Field, particularly M.Y. Murugasen, E. Gurusamy, and A.P. Periyasamy Pulavar started *sangha* activities in Marikuppam, (Kolar Gold Field) by 1907. E.N. Ayyakannu started a library and a Buddhist research centre in Kolar Gold Field. These Subaltern activists became pioneers in caste rejection and self-respect marriages in the early twentieth century. The Siddhartha Printing Press also played a very major role in this emergence. It could be argued that this Dalit movement paved the way to create content for Periyar's self-respect movement in the mid twentieth century (Gowthaman, 2004:72).

[6] It is in this context that Dalit migrations to South Africa, Burma, Ceylon, Fiji, Mauritius, Singapore, Malaysia, Tanzania, and other lands during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries produced interesting shifts for the community. Apart from that, a caste-less cosmopolis was in the making even through internal migration within the subcontinent. It was in the backdrop of the educated and industriously employed in the Madras city, those who were enlisted in the Bangalore cantonment, the miners of Kolar Gold Field, the railway workers of Hubli, the plantation workers of Mercara, the army men of Secunderabad along with the indentured labourers who migrated to other countries, that Tamil Buddhism, the anti-caste public sphere, and the Dalit print could emerge as a movement in the region (Aloysius, 1998:183).

It is pertinent, therefore, to understand – as discussed in the second chapter – that the ideas of dignity, self-respect, freedom, equality, and social justice are linked with a reconfiguration of spaces. The Tamil Dalits *intensify* their experiences and seek to transcend the servile identity that is contained and proscribed within the dominant spaces. Those pushed into a servile experience adopt a language of self-respect and dignity. They attempt to restructure or annihilate or liberate these spaces by deploying a new conceptual vocabulary, which intensifies the experience both spatially and intellectually (Guru and Sarukkai, 2012). Apparenly, like Guru argued, they use the internal heterodox tradition (here Tamil Buddhism) and the external western tradition to reconfigure space as an emancipatory category.

As Guru passionately theorized that the emergence of emancipatory social thought is linked with experiential spaces, the Tamil Dalit migration to different parts of the world and their experiences across the world brought about new changes in reconfiguring the hermeneutics of emancipatory space. As Guru argued that the expansion of ideas is coextensive with the expansion of spaces, it is evident that the Tamil Buddhist movement experimented with new tools of modernity to conceptualize an anti-caste thought and religion to read and create history.

In this context, the Tamil Buddhist intellectuals in the early twentieth century – largely drawn from Dalits – also wrote series of articles and pamphlets. Many prominent Buddhist intellectuals pointed out that even the writing of history was false from the Aryan-Brahmin viewpoint as they erase and do not talk about the histories of the pre-Aryan past. Thass' writings directly addressed the issue of subordination of the original Tamils whose religion was Buddhism. History was employed, they argued, with an intention to keep the former Buddhists ignorant of their own past (Basu: 189).

Basu states that, in the early twentieth century, Thass' efforts and propaganda particularly countered the aggressive *shuddhi* campaigns of the Arya samajists. The communicative skills of the propagandists popularized the message of Buddhism in the lower caste inhabited *Cheris* situated within Madras (Basu: 181).[7] It is also to be noted that, arguably, despite the bleak involvement of the upper castes, middle class intellectuals in the Theosophical Society – particularly during Olcott's leadership – the articulate sections among the Dalits preferred an exclusive organization for their protection, representation, and re-construction of their distinct social identity. The organizations that were formed during this period – the *Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha* (1892) and the *Dravida Mahajana Sabha* (1917) – mobilized the despised communities, where a section of them found employment in European firms and government-run-educational institutions. The individuals who worked in these firms, Basu states, played important roles in the organization of the oppressed communities (186-188).

I suggest that this shadow modernity – the most oppressed communities' engagement with colonial modernity – which provided opportunities for new employment made travel conditional, and displacement was a pre-requisite to search for a-place-at-home and a sense of self. [8] The migration, both internal and overseas,

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[7] The Buddhist association started by Thass set up branches in several localities of Madras such as Pudupet, Narsingapuram and Perambur. Several other Buddhist organizations were also active which established branches in Vellore, Gudiyatham, Pallingonda, Chakkoramallur, Walajahbad, Kanchipuram, and Angambakkam. The movement was largely present in North Arcot, South Arcot, and Chengelpet districts. These campaigns also inspired the workers, the cycle rickshaw drivers, and transport coolies' union to embrace Buddhism in these districts (Basu, 2010:181-182).

[8] When compared, this is similar and significantly in tune with the experience and condition of Blacks and migration. Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) applies a cultural studies approach and provides a study of African intellectual history and its cultural construction of this condition. Gilroy's theme of "double consciousness" studies how Blacks, due to the cross-Atlantic migration, strive to be both European and Black. Such a scope is beyond the purview of this thesis. However, Gilroy's book offers insight to understand the Dalits' engagement with colonial modernity. In fact, the term "double consciousness" as a concept developed by the African-American sociologist and intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) to describe the felt contradiction between social values and daily struggle faced by Blacks in the United States. Being Black meant, Du Bois

brought about certain changes in the economic conditions of the Parayars in some of the Tamil districts of Madras presidency. However, it did not provide a wide scale improvement in the socio-cultural conditions. They remained indigent, socially despised communities who, just like today, received violence from the socially dominant castes. As Rupa Viswanath states there was antagonism and sustained opposition to Dalit welfare. There were united efforts in the 1910s to thwart the demands for civil rights of Madras' first Dalit political representatives (Viswanath, 2014:248).

However, despite the long working hours in plantations and health hazards posed by factories to the coolies, some became independent cultivators, as there was overall improvement in their socio-economic conditions. There was constant social opposition from the landed castes (Basu: 164). The migration, or displacement experience, showed visible signs of growing self-respect, thrift, and hopefulness in the community (Basu: 181-182). While travel displaced them significantly, it conditioned them to essentially imagine a-place-at-home, in relation to a sense of respectful-self as a unique space.

This history of Dalits' engagement with British colonialism and modernity could be explored more and in detail beyond the frames offered by post-colonial and Subaltern Studies' scholars on colonial modernity. In this context, Thass' important contribution to anti-caste thought and the Tamil Buddhist movement in the late nineteenth and twentieth century could be evaluated for a richer understanding of anti-caste history and religion. Social Scientists and writers have done so in the recent past,

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argued, being deprived of a "true self-consciousness." Blacks often perceived themselves through the generalized contempt of White America. Being a Black as well as an American raised contradiction between American social ideals, which Blacks shared (Du Bois: 1-14).

and Thass has become a subject for scholarly interest as well as scorn. The discussion on Thass as a historical discourse and critique evaluates how scholars have treated him thus far for various reasons. This chapter accounts these themes within the discourses such as the Non-Brahmin frame, the critical Orientalist frame, and the anti-caste frame.

THASS FOR "NON-BRAHMIN" DISCOURSE

Geetha and Rajadurai understand the roles played by Dalit intellectuals of the nineteenth and twentieth century as a part of the movement against Brahmins – for a consolidation of a Non-Brahmin conglomerate in the twentieth century. Their work, particularly, gave importance to the Non-Brahmin Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu. Primarily they claimed to "redeem and respond to the criticisms that were raised against the Non-Brahmin movement and its ideologues," especially those raised by the Dalit intellectuals in the 1990s (Geetha and Rajadurai, 1998:xiv). Without discussing much about the work of the historians, they find that the chief limitation of the Anglo-American and much of the left scholarship on the Non-Brahmin movement is its unwillingness and refusal to make the Non-Brahmin speak. Paradoxically, it is equally true that, even in their articulation the most-oppressed of caste – the Dalits – were not allowed to talk autonomously on their own. They criticise the works of David Washbrook and Christopher Baker for situating the emergence of Non-Brahminism in a historical context which is shaped by structural changes in the economy which is later transformed by the administrative complex of the colonial state. Geetha and Rajadurai claim that Non-Brahmin is a genus that includes all castes, high or low in the *varna-jati* complex, which defer to the Brahmin in sacral matters. In other words, they administer that the Non-Brahmin movement is particularly marked by the Brahmin-other.

Geetha and Rajadurai argue that Non-Brahminism is "a historically evolved structure of feeling" in the early twentieth century, where "Brahmin subjectivity was mediated through well-marked rhetorical tropes and discursive concerns" (xiv). The Tamil Brahmins were attributed to have secured a hegemonic presence in colonial civil society. And more so, they were accused of being a distant and alien figure in Tamil society. Hence, even the term Non-Brahmin, which reeves on hatred, is attributed to various trajectories of anti-caste movements beginning with the articulation of Dalit voices that emerged from the last decades of the nineteenth century, and rightly so. While they describe that the relationship between political non-Brahminism and the radical anti-caste politics was complex, they do not, however, find them fundamentally different or discontinuous. In such an approach, even the critical and creative use of religion for an anti-caste community consciousness by Thass is lost, if not given importance.

In this diatribe against Brahmins, the authors write how Brahmin as a category was historically constituted through colonial engagement. For instance, their first chapter opines about the gleaned movement of "the Non-Brahmins as a united front against the Brahmins" in the early twentieth century Madras. They concentrate on the story of the Brahmins, and apparently, found "the Brahmin figure very talkative" (27). The authors criticize the Brahmins' use of colonially motivated and reliant administrative powers, which Brahmins had generally captured during the British colonial rule. The authors highlight that the use of English as the administrative language and the powerful presence of the Brahmins in the colonial civil society are conditions for the hegemony. They finally accuse that "the Brahmins during the colonial rule provided the upper castes an appropriate language and some symbols to

articulate his desires, fears, hopes, and apprehensions by securing a universality for these and to modernize themselves" (39).

However, they refer the Tamil Buddhist movement as one that concerns a group of "Buddhist Parayars" only (44). As it preceded the later Non-Brahmin movement, the authors treated the Tamil Buddhist movement as a precursor to the Dravidian ideology and one of transition. However, the movement itself was not given an autonomous anti-caste perspective. It is to be noted that the Tamil Buddhist movement had conceived of the Tamil civilization as integral rather than divisive, interactive rather than exclusionary and inter-communicative rather than lofty and distant.

One could say that Geetha and Rajadurai, hence, misrepresent Thass as one who stands for syncretic Tamil centrism and Sanskrit opposition. Besides, Thass never floated the Non-Brahmin conglomeration as an alternative emancipatory identity, which the authors state. They claimed that equality was proclaimed as an ideal by Non-Brahmins, as they came to demonstrate and realize their rights of access to places, events, and honours that were conventionally denied to them. It was under the name of culture that Thass was also taken within the "Non-Brahmin" political frame by the authors. He clearly opposed even this conglomeration "Non-Brahmin." He discouraged any form of fundamental negativity as a form of ethical life. Dubbing both the Non-Brahmin and the *Adi-Dravida* protest as one and the same was just a strategy to challenge the supremacy of Brahmin power. It does not necessarily become anti-caste, and challenge caste-power as such, when the face of the Brahmin challenge changed.

While Thass' critique of *swadeshi* reform and *swaraj* movement was against the conduct of the Brahmin proponents of caste through nationalism, Geetha and Rajadurai only highlight the civic fights, and not his work on Tamil Buddhism. They suggest that

"his plea for a political ideal that embraced social reform and democratic political activity, and his criticism of the *swadeshis*, seem to underwrite the political philosophy of the Non-Brahmins" (66). In a vague attempt, they club all critiques on *swadeshi* nationalists as constituting a Non-Brahmin conglomerate. Thass was never given his own autonomy and historical importance. His attempts were just clubbed as one which appreciated the work of British in India. They were treated as an *Adi-Dravida* narrative that awaited a Non-Brahmin millennium to become a social movement.

Secondly, the authors narrate that the socially oppressed *Adi-Dravidas* in the pages of *Tamizhan* – the journal that Thass ran – evinced faith and good will on the British rulers. Particularly, "the entry into army, and the fashioning of a martial self in the emperor's uniform" – the authors claim that "these changes increased the self-perception of the socially oppressed" (Geetha and Rajadurai: 69). However, they do not recognize the multiple means through which the oppressed engaged with the British and it reflects apathy over not making the oppressed speak for themselves. Instead, an underlying accusation seems to mask the logic and that is – the *Adi-Dravidas*, indeed, showed good faith on the British rule, and this signified the ideology of "being ruled." The *Adi-Dravida's* faith towards the British presence in India is counter-posed to be the main element behind the unity of the Non-Brahmin.

In many ways, Non-Brahmin, as an anomaly, misrecognizes the anti-caste movement led by the most oppressed. If the Non-Brahmin millennium had been an anti-caste millennium, the supposed possibilities of *post-caste* interaction and bonding at the social level would have emerged in the contemporary. Even though "there emerged new modes of perception, new structures of feeling, and new imaginings of the self" (Geetha and Rajadurai: 86), the deliberate failure to recognize the survival of caste amongst the Non-Brahmins in this period is a problem that the authors neither

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reflect nor record. And the Non-Brahmin conglomerate's attitude towards caste as social oppression is problematic, when they do not recognize the autonomous possibilities of the anti-caste framework propelled by the most oppressed for a *post-caste* future. In the words of Dravidian "Non-Brahmin" intellectuals, Thass indeed had to wait for Periyar.[9]

The Buddhist tracts of Masilamani, Iyothee Thass, Narayanasami Pulavar, Periyasami Pulavar, and others are parochial according to the authors. Not only have they argued that the tracts in *Tamizhan* were "chiefly concerned with the problem of the Parayar," but they also identify that these social movements from the most oppressed as "merely identitarian" (88). They execute double standards as they treat Thass' critical writings as simultaneously offering something to the Dravidian movement, as well as being mired as a mere "Parayar movement." Thass' discussion on treating Sanskrit along with Tamil and Pali, which bears an anti-caste, pre-Brahminical, Buddhist legacy was not seriously attended to and studied. Their intent was to include Thass to claim a context, and to create a Dravidian political legacy. Hence, they read Thass to misrecognize, if not appropriate, him for a movement to which he was opposed and was far removed from.

Not only they club Thass with other *Adi-Dravida* intellectuals who centered around the *Tamizhan* journal, but they also misread the vivid and creative historiographical imagination at work. They read Thass and others only as reaping the

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[9] To exaggerate and extend a little bit, it is not hard to notice that Ambedkar and his followers claimed that Jyotirao Phule was his/their pre-cursor and guide for the movement against caste in Maharashtra and elsewhere. Whereas, no such claims are made by either Periyar or his followers. Ayyathurai tritely argues that the Dalits never assumed the egalitarian treatment in Non-Brahmin consciousness. They were ambiguously placed, he claims, in the Non-Brahmin discourse. This led to "the *retention* of a dichotomy between the Dalits and non-brahmins unsurprisingly, as it was between the non-brahmins and brahmins" (Ayyathurai, 2011:25). He concludes thus – while Thass' articulations precede Periyar's critique of caste and Brahminism "by more than three decades," what remains unexamined or acknowledged is the connection between their palpable resonations (219).

new colonialist knowledge of the time to their advantage. Geetha and Rajadurai claim that the "enlightenment" notions of time which produced new colonialist knowledge such as philology, linguistics, anthropology, and a universal philosophy of history were used unilaterally by the *Adi-Dravida* intellectuals. They account a series of reasons to frame that this anti-caste critique was only produced by bilingual and literate natives, who used interpretative means to grapple and make sense of a complex and distant past. This makes sense as they argue that from the mid nineteenth century, "the Aryan theory of race provided Brahmins, Non-Brahmins, and *Adi-Dravida* intellectuals with a stock of arguments that they could deploy at will in their semantic and political quarrels with each other" (104). It is unfortunate that they use this argument to justify and reduce the anti-caste movement by the most oppressed as a "deployment at will" (104). They did not treat it as an autonomous resistance of any kind, but only as a fringe movement that awaited the Non-Brahmin millennium.

The authors falsely treat these critiques of caste, which precede the Dravidian movement, as contesting only the pre-eminence of the Sanskrit language. This is not true in the case of Thass. Alternatively, he had treated Pali, Sanskrit, and Tamil as languages through which the Buddhist thought was spread across the continent. Hence, the work of Thass, particularly, is not linked with the Aryanist theory, rather he inverts it. The authors treated him as "an amateur philologist, examining words, splitting them up, identifying their roots and reconstructing their meaning, as he desired to recover the past in its own moment" (104). This would make him a maverick and an eccentric at work; and his writing a historiographical adventure. This act of Thass – why would he do what he does – was never treated as a serious subject of enquiry.

They also claim in a holistic fashion that *Adi-Dravida* intellectuals such as Thass, Maasilamani, Narayanasami Pillay, Periyasami Pulavar, Swapneswari and

others inaugurated and practiced an art of criticism which was polemical and dictated by existential needs. This alternative reading of history, a coming together of all human beings on a shared commonality, was in the name of a civilizational religion – Tamil Buddhism. But Geetha and Rajadurai called the movement as Dravidian in character and Tamil by association. Being "Dravidian" is touted as renouncing caste, while being "Tamil" meant "acknowledging an autonomous history that belonged to all Dravidians" (104). But this was just to state that the Tamils are a distinctive race of people, as agents and actors in a history which owed little or nothing to Aryan influences, as they claim. Hence the movement by Thass and his intellectual work was to recover and restore a moment of original grace. This was to create a consciousness of the community and society that was singular and distinctive. Hence, their reading of Thass' movement through the Non-Brahmin millennium renders the foundations of anti-caste, a mere Tamil distinctiveness and singularity. This is conceptualized and termed as a discovery of "otherness" that was continuously used by *Adi-Dravida* intellectuals and Non-Brahmin movement (104).

They also construe that the work by the protestant missionaries from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries such as Ziegenbalg, Rhenius, and Bernard Schmidt made Tamil a popular language of Christianity. This, they state, indeed produced an inevitable "anti-aryanism and anti-sanskritism" (104). They argue that this seems to be the background which makes Thass not to read the past as a history of victimhood and oppression. Therefore, Thass' foray into history transcends the ground of historiography which reclaims a hermeneutical trajectory governed by the laws of the imaginative rather than that of empirical enquiry. His entire intellectual work is dependent upon the European interface, they suggest.

Hence, though Thass and other anti-caste intellectuals searched for an authentic past, they just facilitated the emergence of Tamil classicism, a concern with origins, and of Tamil literati whose traditional learning was now subverted to serve the anxieties of the present. Thass, hence, is called as "an antiquarian ideologue" (an accusation that Pandian also makes). This created the ideological conditions that made the *Adi-Dravida* emergence serve a political Non-Brahminism with a purposive edge (Geetha and Rajadurai: 104).

One of the primary reasons, for Geetha and Rajadurai, to conceptualize the Non-Brahmin millennium was their foremost "passion to unravel the legacy of Non-Brahminism by examining the political and social comradeship between caste Hindus and Dalits" which, they claim, the movement enabled (501). This is one of the primary problems. The various ways through which the most oppressed responded to the continuing violence against Dalits, and a retrograde male chauvinism that sought to police women's lives and public morality, were never factored in as critical and pertinent problems to review the movement. Nor the history of the "*Adi-Dravida* assertion," as they claim, was treated on par with an anti-caste radicalism which largely altered the world view of Subaltern movements that used religious and linguistic sources against caste. Their only account was to equate and bring together the genealogy of anti-caste as "Dravidian in content and specific in Tamil" (504). Hence, they reject the Dalit critique on the Dravidian movement's claim to political and social power, which seriously discounts the importance of anti-caste Tamil radicalism of the Self-Respect movement.

In fact, Irschick informs that, as early as 1917, the Justice party's political proposals for a unified Non-Brahmin mobilization were rejected by none other than the major Dalit political leader Rettaimalai Sreenivasan who founded the *Parayar*

Mahajana Sabha. He, reportedly, rejects them because "this would bring a caste Hindu Raj which would mean ruin for the Dalits" (Irschick, 1969:71-72). Hence, scholars critically evaluate the Non-Brahmin movement of the 1910s and 1920s in Madras with respect to its inclusiveness and anti-casteism. Historians have skeptically pointed out that the elite social groups from which Non-Brahminism arose were no better suited than their Brahmin rivals to bring about any real democratization of politics in South India (Irschick, 1969; Baker and Washbrook, 1975; Washbrook, 1977). While these studies are critical in their evaluation of the Non-Brahmin movement, even Geetha and Rajadurai's book-title denotes the simultaneous assimilation of Dalit anti-caste sentiment into an elite Non-Brahmin movement. The sub-title *From Iyothee Thass to Periyar* refers to Thass as a Dalit leader who preceded the Non-Brahmin movement, who however, never used or accepted the term (Dharmaraj, "Rebel's Genealogy").

In the tone of belittling the Dalit movement's trenchant activities against caste, Geetha and Rajadurai suggest that leaders from the Dalit communities who possessed political power had a truncated political imagination. They find no use for it in their utopian or millenarian thought which remains as a staple of all anti-caste discourses in the modern period (504). This is also very true of Pandian's seminal work *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin* (2007), where he studies Thass along with Maraimalai Adigal (1876-1950) to conceptualize how "the new voice of the Non-Brahmin speak of the other and make their own self" (102-143). Pandian acknowledges that a network of associational life in the Madras presidency, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was run by the oppressed to air their views and grievances by setting up publishing tracts and organizations. However, just like Geetha and Rajadurai, he also understands them as being talkative only about the Brahmin. This is not necessarily a talking – in their own voice – about a community of freedom as "untouchables, Sudras, neo-

Buddhists, Saivaites, and rationalists" (Pandian: 102). He observes that Thass had to talk about the Brahmin, to speak of one's emancipatory self. This is an inadequate reading as it does not account, if not deny, the role of oppressed communities' fight against caste in history.

Apart from calling Iyothee Thass as an untouchable "Parayar intellectual," a term which Thass out rightly rejected, Pandian, just like Geetha and Rajadurai, also termed Thass as an exemplar old-word intellectual in the Tamil region. Textualism and religious debate were the only modes of cultural intervention, he claimed, that Thass practiced. Hence, his critiques of the Brahmin were primarily in the domain of culture, Pandian clarifies. Thass had started an *Advaidananda Sabha* (1870), followed by the *Dravida Mahajana Sabha* (1891) in Nilgiris, and much as a grass roots organization the *Sakya Buddhist Sangam* (1898) in Madras and the North-Western region of the presidency. However, Pandian had failed to recognize and acknowledge the organic nature of the political work that anti-caste intellectuals like Thass were doing against dominant caste culture through their works in writing and action, particularly against the caste-Hindu reactions.[10] Pandian claims that Thass' insistent aim to start the magazine *Tamizhan* in 1907 was a self-conscious pedagogy. But alternatively, Thass had started the magazine "to teach justice, right path, and truthfulness to people *who could not discriminate* between the excellent, the mediocre, and the bad" (Aloysius, 1998:61, emphasis mine).

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[10] Though these organizations have disappeared after the death of Thass – some even during his life-time, discontinuity of centres of activism as a mark to evaluate or reject a social movement is ineffectual and not genuine. This reading surely belies Pandian's credentials as a brilliant scholar and exponent of Subaltern and Dravidian Studies – he could have been just better. Meanwhile, Geetha too, changing her earlier position, came-up with an evocative critique on the hinduization of the Non-Brahmins titled "*Paarpanaraladhar Saadhi Indhukkalaga Maariya Kadhai*" ("*How Non-Brahmins became Caste-Hindus – The Story*," 2017), but not in English, as recent as June 2017. In contrast, works by Aloysius (1998), Gowthaman (2004), Dharmaraj (2007), Ayyathurai (2011), and Rajangam (2016) study Thass through different modes of enquiry – sociological, religious, cultural, historical-anthropology, and literary – as an anti-caste organic intellectual, who also worked on an epistemology against Hinduism as a social movement. I discuss this in the later part of the chapter.

While Thass treats writing history as a pedagogic act, Pandian declares that Thass' history is nothing but an ethnographic curiosity that is based on self-knowledge. An enquiry, he states, that is fundamentally based on the history of the animosity between the Parayars and Brahmins. However, he also considers that in the absence of any historiographic details, the claims of Thass are revelatory and mythical. However, messianic claims through religion have been a universal claim for emancipation and resistance of the oppressed across the world (Lanternari, 1964). In fact, Thass' exegetic journey through numerous Tamil texts such as *Thirukkural, Silappadhikaram, Manimekalai, Tholkaapiyam,* and *Nannool* yielded him further evidence of Buddhist presence in the Tamil country. This was through a persistent intellectual labour, ingenious and idiosyncratic interpretation of etymology, and remarkable flights of imagination.

Pandian positively reads Thass' works as the story about the conquered, while comparing it with G. Subramania Iyer's *Arya Jana Ikiyam alladhu Congress Mahasabai* (*Unity of the Aryan People or the Congress Party*, 1888). Identifying it as "competing claims about the past," Pandian suggests that the story of the Dravidian Buddhists rendered "the conquered visible and placed their supposed conquerors in relation to them." Hence, in comparison to Iyer's narrative, Pandian found that "Thass' claim insisted on morality and ethics in his cultural project" (110-111). However, while reading positively, what Pandian calls as the "Parayar past," Thass' research was only accidental and revelatory. He states that Thass' research was unhistorical and mythical; neither sequential nor chronological. Hence, Pandian describes that though it was not an attempt to recover and invent a history, Thass' Tamil Buddhism had a temporal and spatial imprecision. Though history was pedagogic for Thass, however, for Pandian it only recovers a "paradigmatic Buddhist Parayar past" to critique the Brahmin in the

twentieth century (111-112). Accordingly, Thass participated in a historical discourse that just denied Brahmin-hood to the Brahmin.

Pandian evaluates Thass as emphasizing individual moral conduct, and confines him to the limited realm of religio-cultural practices, "directing only the Buddhist Parayars." Thus, he charged that "Thass' proposed measures avoided confronting the question of uneven power between castes." Much more, he understands, Thass only as "borrowing Buddhism from Brahminical-Hinduism" (117-118). Thass instructing cleanliness to the Buddhist masses, suddenly, became an accusation about imitating the Brahmin. He interprets that Thass "idealized existing Brahminical practices and inferiorized Parayar practices such as fire-walking and animal sacrifices" (118). Thereby, he brands him as "practicing attunement" (Connolly, 1996:17) – a strategy by which members of a community become closely oriented to a higher direction in being and to the more harmonious life it renders possible.

Pandian argues that this initiates nothing but a variety of self-hate and only by attuning their current religious practices to a "higher" ritual ideal could the oppressed – Dalits – become Buddhist. This, he states, is a boringly pedagogic project that causes estrangement and creates a painful artifice of normalization. This argument is legitimized by the limited following that Thass' Tamil Buddhism had. Importantly, the exegetic strategy of producing commentaries on literary texts and recovering for Buddhism, as practiced by Thass, made him an elitist who constituted just an exclusivist public. This anti-caste public sphere – a "literary public," Pandian states that "excluded the Tamil Subalterns, as it demanded specific forms of literary competence and interpretive skills" (118-119). This accusation is strikingly like the Marxist critique

of both Ambedkar and Ambedkarites, which treats the movement against caste for self-respect as bourgeois and nationalist.[11]

Moreover, Pandian, without accounting the role of "Pandit" as a career that was obliterated and shunned by popular religion seekers, decreed that Thass' intellectual labour failed to reach the realm of the popular. While, Thass fashioned and laboured as an organic intellectual, Pandian relegated him to the likes of "a Parayar politician" who was constrained and limited by the religio-cultural space. Pandian even states that as Thass' movement did not emerge in the popular, his followers later had to "secularize" themselves and "mobilize as Parayars" to contest the Brahmins in the domain of the political. Hence, they become foot soldiers of the Dravidian movement under the leadership of Periyar Ramasamy. Pandian understood that mobilization had to be a broad coalition of Non-Brahmins of varied identities against Brahminical dominance and hegemony.

In an ingenious way, as mentioned earlier, Pandian equates Thass' movement with that of Maraimalai Adigal's (1876-1950) "Saivaite Dravidianism," but differentiates it largely from Periyar E.V. Ramasamy's (1879-1973) Self Respect movement, which propagated a rationalist critique couched in everyday Tamil.[12]

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[11] Accusing the Dalit movement as compliant agents of capitalism and its political regime, Ambedkar and Ambedkarites are also termed as treacherous. They subordinate the poor and toiling sections of lower caste masses to the regime of rich and elite, Marxists blame, despite their demagogy for the poor and the downtrodden. Accounting 29 venomous essential differences between the Ambedkarites and the Marxists, the article purports that Ambedkar must be opposed. It also substantially reproduces a partial biography of Ambedkar, which apparently terms him as a bourgeois liberal, an avowed anti-Marxist, a coward Brahminical, and a servant of the capital ("Why Marxists must Oppose Ambedkar and Ambedkarism?," 2015).

[12] Pandian opined that Thass is closer to Maraimalai Adigal, though not similar, because there was a parallel between the Tamil they deployed. He states that the discursive strategies used by both were common. They both used ideas of: "golden ageism," the deployment of the conceit of the Brahmin, Brahminical religious practices as selective borrowings from indigenous Tamils, and foregrounding a hierarchy of values to define oneself. However, Pandian uncritically equates Thass with Adigal. Unlike many Subaltern Tamil intellectuals of his times, Thass used the classical commentarial style in writing selectively. Extremely known for his wit, Thass' use of epic-style, narrative based, historical investigations, as well as, recording oral traditions present among the oppressed castes were also written in the journalistic prose form. The style of writing, hence, was also experimental as it went against

Periyar, according to Pandian, could mobilize varied identities that came under the Non-Brahmin coalition. Pandian reasons that Periyar's critique of Brahmins and Hindu religious practices that inferiorized "lower castes, women, physical labour, and non-Sanskritic languages" (120) was a rallying point under which such a bottom of the caste-hierarchy coalition could be made.

On many levels, such a reading dismisses, if not misleads, an anti-caste intellectual to speak for himself. Thass readily engaged with the social world of his times. His approach to common people's politics and his activism were organic in many ways. Neither did he dwell in a world of splendour nor did he move away from everyday politics. Oppressed subaltern intellectuals have always reinterpreted an anti-caste religion of their own, while contesting the dominant past that locates them as untouchables. Pandian seemed to have not recognized this aspect of the anti-caste movement. A Dalit critique of the Dravidian movement generates from the position of social experience and emancipatory vision. Obliterating such a view is a serious failure to understand a resistant critique that emanates from an embodied Dalit occupying an anti-caste position. Instead, Pandian reads the embodied critique of caste, from the most oppressed in their historical attempts, as enunciating only a "politics of attunement" that never concerns wider political publics. This is an act of denial to those for whom it matters. It is indeed a violent denial. Moreover, translating the Subaltern attempts towards assertive emancipatory thought as valorising caste is nothing but necessarily

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external resource-based historical writing. He used this style well, to create a cosmology of anti-caste imaginary within a resistant tradition in Tamil language. In that, he was countering received notions of caste cosmologies of Brahminical Hinduism through Tamil Buddhism. He wrote and worked through Subaltern religious movements to differentiate them from the dominant ones in the early twentieth century. In comparison, hence, though Adigal started a federation called *Podhu Nilai Kazhagam* (*Common Value Federation*), he conveniently declined and refused equality to a multitude of lower caste Tamils in his writings. Thass, though used a supposedly high-Tamil register, worked amongst the oppressed masses; but was dismissively equated with Adigal by Pandian (138-141).

refusing to look beyond the world of the dominant – here the discourse on Brahmin as the central figure.

Thass did not just negatively abuse dominant religion, but he founded a "counter-throw" by re-imagining an emancipatory religion that rationalizes sociality against caste immunitas. He produced a creative textuality that contests caste oppression instituted through a religion. This counter-throw on history, by Thass, is pedagogic because change is the ultimate desire. Texts that have insisted to place a rationalized community over-written on the idea of a united "Non-Brahmin" cluster, against the guile of the historical Brahmin, do not qualitatively refer and acknowledge the practice of caste in obliterating their own pre-histories. One is neither ethical nor moral when one does not engage with religions that contest caste. The Dalit engagement with religion then is fundamentally about a textuality of ethics to foreground a political community.

For instance, Dharmaraj's "Rebel's Genealogy" (2008), in this context, criticizes Pandian's formulations on the Brahmin and the Non-Brahmin. He accounts that Pandian's theoretical concepts lack particular use for the Tamil society, as he only writes to the English academia. Especially his use of the term "Non-Brahmin" is central only to the English scholarship from the twentieth century, and not particularly to the Tamil public sphere. The concept, Dharmaraj argues, only appears in English and may wrongly determine the politics of the entire Tamil people, especially the most oppressed. Importantly, he finds that there is no unity that is valid behind the term "Non-Brahmin."

To bring the question of hereditary land power, Rupa Viswanath clearly states that not only cultural and social, but also in political and economic terms, "the division

between elite Non-Brahmin castes and Brahmins bears no comparison to that of landed castes and hereditarily unfree oppressed communities." She pitches that it was "the depressed classes who most often conceptualised a critique of caste in terms of the relation between landed elements and landless Dalit labourers" (Viswanath, 2014:247-248). Hence, Pandian's simplistic understanding of colonialism as the sole cause for the emergence of Brahmin figure, his inadequate perspective on Iyothee Thass and oppressed communities' engagement with colonialism, and finally the depiction of Dravidian politics as "Subaltern" are problematic.[13] Dharmaraj, in fact, underlines that the discourses on colonialism and Orientalism continue to uphold the Brahmin on the one hand, but deny the role of oppressed communities' fight against caste in the history of Tamil Nadu.

Pandian, hence, did not allow an anti-caste intellectual to speak for himself. He read Thass in isolation with Adigal, rather than comparing the social world and the context that produced their texts. Thass readily engaged with the social world of his times. His approach to common people's politics and his activism were organic in many ways. He did not dwell in a world of splendour nor did he move away from everyday politics. Oppressed Subaltern intellectuals have always reinterpreted an anti-caste religion of their own, while contesting the dominant past that locates them as untouchables. On the one hand, Pandian valorises the "Non-Brahmin" as a political binary to the Brahmin in a discourse situated in colonialism; while on the other, it is

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[13] Dharmaraj disagrees with the reasons Pandian gives for the sudden and simultaneous emergence of the Brahmin caste along with the configuration of Hinduism and nationalism. While, Pandian indicates that the scathing critiques propounded by European missionaries and the ancient glory of Hinduism "discovered" by Orientalists like Annie Besant were the causes; but Dharmaraj pin points that the marginalized communities used the missionaries as "tools to give them voice." They were served through them what they formerly lacked access to – education, jobs, and economic opportunities. Thus, it was often the case with movements such as: Muthu Kutty Samigal and the *Ayyavazhi* movement in Southern Tamil Nadu, and Iyothee Thassa Pandithar and the Tamil Buddhist movement in northern Tamil Nadu, which particularly focused on emancipation from oppression. Pandian fails to recognize, he argues, that they sought to uproot cultural domination by rejecting Hinduism and caste. While Thass, like other such tall anti-caste figures, constructed a collective identity for the marginalized, Pandian however inappropriately relegated him as a "Parayar Buddhist."

intellectually and politically defective, when he rejects the unilateral voice of Thass, by assimilating him with Adigal's caste-centric sectarian Saivism that was in opposition to anything egalitarian and social.

Geetha, Rajadurai, and Pandian, in other words, fail to recognize that concrete experience can become a necessary epistemic resource for the progression of concepts, "not as a mere journey of concepts that refer to other concepts alone" (Guru and Sarukkai: 121) – here Non-Brahmin as a concept. This is thus a failure to read the moral and political force of the categories of resistance with a unified meaning. Buddhism had a hermeneutic and political power to interrogate Brahminism according to Thass, but perhaps, "Non-Brahmin" intellectuals had a different take on the experiential hermeneutic as a counter to caste.

For Thass, critiquing caste and creating an anti-caste community imaginary was not just to portray the Brahmin as a figure of scorn with an appropriated ideal status. It was a subversive attempt to create a textuality that refutes and creates a religion and culture against caste. Pandian interpreted that the metaphysics of caste as an enforced hierarchy largely remained largely intact in Thass; his discourses only underscored the continuing power of the Brahmin in the Tamil context. This reading is more than vindictive. Pandian refused to acknowledge that not just "Non-Brahmin," but an anti-caste critique has a long historical significance, though a discontinuous one, and various Dalits were indeed its active participants, which the next chapter will discuss.

In similar terms, a strong critique is placed against the post-colonial and Subaltern theorisations of Indian modernity and caste from the standpoint of vernacular cosmopolitanism – which is anti-caste and from a "Dalit point of view" (Ayyathurai, 2014:133-140). This is theorized from the position that foregrounds literatures of the

world that are grounded, and not of world-literatures that are linked to each other in abstraction (Shankar, 2012). Shankar offers a genuine critique of the post-colonial, trans-national cosmopolitanism, and reverses the attention to vernacular cosmopolitanism. He argues that the elitist post-colonialism created the vernacular as parochial and the space where caste resides as a residue. Hence, he claims that in their writings and films, "the outcaste as a figure lurks as a shadow throughout" (29). It is suggestive that the most oppressed, however, used the vernacular to counter caste so as to offer a cosmopolitan framework of emancipatory humanism from their given position.

However, anti-Brahminical views have been prevalent in South India and Ceylon since the middle of the nineteenth century. Although, what is usually noticed is the Non-Brahmin upper caste positions against the Brahmins, but never the marginalized communities' anti-caste practices that took both the Brahmins and Non-Brahmin upper castes to task. This shields the actors of the Non-Brahmin movement, Dravidian movement and the Self-Respect movement as caste-less, whereas the Dalits who had lead anti-caste mobilizations are brushed with significations of caste. Tamil Dalit intellectuals, particularly, find fault with the self-presentation of the Non-Brahmin movement's "common sense" as radical. They criticize it as being "produced, reinforced, and threateningly indoctrinated by a section of English-speaking Dravidian intellectuals" (Ravikumar and Azhagarasan, 2012:xxv).[14] This is indeed a serious

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[14] Tamil Dalit intellectual Ravikumar criticizes the academic works of M.S.S. Pandian, V. Geetha, S.V. Rajadurai, and S. Anandhi for uncritically overlooking the flaws and problems of the Dravidian movement and history that had at its core a Brahmin and Non-Brahmin alliance of dominance. He states that the academic Non-Brahmin antagonism against Brahmins historically alternated between conflict and cooperation. He counters the Non-Brahmin histories with the works by historians such as David Washbrook and Eugene Irschick who had, on the other hand, engaged critically with the thrust of the Non-Brahmin movement. He suggests that the Brahmin and higher Non-Brahmin caste alliance played a crucial role in the institutionalization of untouchability and the caste-system in Tamil Nadu. Much clearly, he identifies that, the enthusiastic Non-Brahmin alliance with the Brahmins led to – the destruction of Buddhism and Jainism in Tamil Nadu, *vedic*-Brahmin religion taking root, caste-system

critique on the foundations of history in India that contribute to erase anti-caste public memory. Particularly, the role of academics and history-writing in India calls for a critical anti-caste perspective.

CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT – THASS AND ORIENTALISM

On the other hand, Michael Bergunder studies "Aryan migration theory," and its impact on the identity-forming discourses of different groups in India, and scrutinizes the twentieth century Subaltern movements in the Indian subcontinent (Bergunder, 2004:59-104). Though his study unifies the Subaltern movements during the twentieth century to understand them as contesting Hindu pasts, he captures the Orientalist contribution to the same, which Geetha and Rajadurai also suggests. However, Bergunder broadly compares Phule's anti-Brahminism, Indian Neo-Buddhism – Thass' and Ambedkar's, Tamil Neo-Saivism, the Dravidian movement, *Adi-Hindu* and *Ad-Dharm* movement, and the Hindu nationalist movement during this interesting epoch in relation and in continuity. He argues that the Orientalist theories of the nineteenth century become the reference points for developing "identity-shaping" discourses about Indian pre-history during the twentieth century. He conceives that the Aryan migration theory, as a nineteenth century Orientalist speculative concept, became a part of the colonial dominant discourse. It was invariably reproduced by the Indian elites as well as the British. By the mid of nineteenth century, after an initial spate of racial construction of the Indian pre-history and its explanation of the caste system, caste-elites' interest in the Aryan-migration theory mostly faded, he argues. However, the Subaltern, anti-Brahminical liberation movements used it as an important theme in their identity forming discourses (Bergunder: 60-62).

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getting strengthened, and untouchability becoming entrenched (Ravikumar and Azhagarasan, 2012:xv-xxxiii).

Bergunder, firstly, lists the Orientalist and caste-elite discourses on the Aryan migration theory (59-62), although he particularly credits Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890) for the first comprehensive reinterpretation of the Aryan migration theory for a Subaltern, anti-Brahminical perspective. Phule's *Gulamgiri* or *The Slavery* (1873) was considered as one of the first critiques of Aryan migration.[15] However, Bergunder finds that though Phule's concerns were to promote a sense of common collective identity, there was an automatic disassociation from the Dalits. "Autonomous Dalit movement," he argues, "rejected Phule's inclusivist models of identity on the one hand, but on the other, the Dalit movement considers their emancipation as a direct result of Phule's efforts" (66). He conceptualizes this transition as moving from anti-Brahminism to Indian neo-Buddhism.

Bergunder studies the Subaltern, anti-Aryan discourse that the Dalit movement propagated through Buddhism, within the last hundred years. Particularly, he concentrates on the Tamil Buddhist movement and the Ambedkarite neo-Buddhist movement. In his reading, Henry Steel Olcott of the Theosophical Society influentially mediated the Sakya Buddhist Society, which was started by Thass. Olcott had set up the necessary contacts with the Sinhalese Buddhists and subsequently supported the Tamil Buddhists. Hence, Bergunder seems to suggest that Thass was brought in by the Theosophical Society to study the Aryan intrusion. However, one could also fathom that, it was an attempt towards emancipation from the Brahminical Hindu oppression through recollecting the supposed religion of their forbears. Hence, one could ask why this would just be "a very idiosyncratic Parayar Buddhist reconstruction of the religious history of the Tamils?" (Bergunder: 68) Particularly, when it works as a contestation to

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[15] Bergunder considers that Phule's writings contain the clearest formulation of an interpretative framework within which the Aryan migration theory was understood. Phule used myths for a reinterpretation, particularly Bali's and the Parasurama's, to consider that slavery as a system was invented by Brahminical conquest through the pernicious fiction of the Caste system (64).

the re-descriptions in the nineteenth century that discuss "who are the Parayars?" from many positions (Irschick, 1994:153-190).[16]

Bergunder investigates the field around which such a discourse by the most oppressed could come about. He accounts that the Theosophical Society's literature on Buddhism, the administrative and reformist texts on Parayars, the print sphere supported by Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907) and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), and their 1880s books on the Parayars created this field. However, he also mentions that the questions that were raised when U.V. Swaminatha Iyer published the Tamil epic *Manimekalai* (1891) as a printed text made the field even more vibrant. Especially the idea that texts could be allocated with the idea of religion started when *Thirukkural* was characterized "as a work of Buddhist hue" in 1855 by Karl Grand (1814-1864). These were factors, Bergunder reasoned, that made *Indhirar Dhesa Sarithiram* − Thass' experiment with History, a rhetoric that emphasized the "irreconcilable enmity between the Brahmins and the Parayars" (70-71).

While recognizing that Thass' texts are a comprehensive reconstruction of the destroyed Tamil Buddhist tradition, Bergunder highlights that this attempt towards emancipation was particularly based on interpretation, more than anything else. Thass interprets practically the whole of classical Tamil literature as Buddhist textual remains. This rereading of Tamil history and culture is carried out in great detail. While Thass exposes a glorious Buddhist past of the Dravidians, Bergunder argues that, he

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[16] Bergunder argues that the Parayars were particularly reproduced as "the disinherited sons of the soil and the earth"; a discourse that was invariably produced in administrative statements, official documents and reformist tracks in the late nineteenth century. For instance, F.W. Ellis (1778-1819) in the year 1818 refers to the Paraiyans of Tondai Mandalam as "the real proprietors of the soil." Then in 1894, William Gouldie (1857-1922) calls the Parayars, "the self-evident disinherited children of the soil." And in 1909, Edgar Thurston (1855-1935) summarized that the "Paraiyans as a race are very ancient." Hence, he reasons that the "Parayars as the oldest inhabitants of the South" discourse appears soon to have become linked with the Dravidian idea. Hence, he links that the Dalits must have taken inspiration from such narratives to reinterpret the Aryan migration theory (68-69).

comprehensively attempts to create a "collective memory" and a "collective identity" for the oppressed. He identifies this attempt as a radical reconstruction of Indian religious history, which recurs as a motif with Indian Neo-Buddhism. Bergunder also underlines an important continuity by terming that the "real renaissance" started with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's work (72).

In foregrounding that Hinduism, and its textual foundation, as a recent product of British colonial rule, Bergunder finds that Thass' extreme modern figures of speech and anti-Brahminical polemic are Orientalist in nature. And further, he states that a remarkable echo of Thass is also found in Ambedkar's remarks on "the origin of untouchability" (Ambedkar, 1989). Although they appear differently in different contexts against caste, for Bergunder, the struggle for an autonomous Dalit movement – from Thass to Ambedkar – is in "continuity" through neo-Buddhism. However, he differentiates and highlights Ambedkar's view of the history of the untouchables. Ambedkar, accordingly, rejects any racial interpretation of the Aryan migration theory. Bergunder understands that Thass and Ambedkar had reasonably claimed that untouchables were the original inhabitants. However, they indeed rejected Brahminism and Hinduism as ultimately religions of "foreign origin" (Bergunder: 79).

Interestingly, Bergunder maps that even by the end of twentieth century, "western Indologists did not contest Aryan migration theory" (90-91). In this context, he claims that "subaltern interpretations" (89) of the theory were a radical and powerful counter proposition to the idea of a common Hindu nation. Hence, the increasing political influence of Hindu nationalism in the 1990s, he argues, resulted in attempts to revise the Aryan migration theory. This was indeed an attempt to suppress the emancipatory movements. He clearly locates this problem in the early 1990s, and terms

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the right wing groups' rejection of Subaltern reinterpretations as Hindu revisionist theories. He summarizes that Hindu revisionism is adorned with a post-colonial façade.

However, Bergunder's important study suggests that Subaltern resistance is possible through the anti-Brahminical reinterpretations of the Aryan migration theory, particularly through the active inversion of dominant discourses. Bergunder states that these resistances were socially relevant. Hence, though the Orientalist theories of the nineteenth century feed into the identity shaping discourses about Indian pre-history, the intent of Subaltern reinterpretations were not the same as the Orientalists and the Hindu revivalists. They did not just contest pasts, but invariably produced anti-caste social imaginaries as civilizational memory. In other words, the anti-caste intellectuals who took to Buddhism subtracted caste-subjectivity to understand the self as a "chain of alterations." Caste is not a thing – it is a no-thing – it is a violent relationship; hence, they insist on a transformation of this relationship into a sense of being toward the world. Perhaps, anti-caste thoughts on community foregrounds compearance – coming together.

THASS FOR ANTI-CASTE CRITIQUE

Although Aloysius, Dharmaraj, Gowthaman, and Ayyathurai address the same issue and use Thass as a point of reference, yet they differ largely from earlier writers. They study Thass' works by giving importance to the ideas of communitary experience and experiential community. Aloysius's very large canvas on the Tamil Buddhist movement, during the opening decades of the century, significantly addressed the academic amnesia and historiographical neglect. The Subaltern groups' memories of past grandeur and of their Buddhist heritage, and even of the Tamil and/or Dravidian heritage, have been a neglected area of study. His sociological study treated "religion-

in-society" as "religion-in-transformation." He primarily argued that "human emancipation did not limit itself to social and political realms alone;" it is not premised by "a negation of the religio-spiritual spheres but extends to all realms of existence" (Aloysius, 1998:7). Hence, "religion-in-transformation" is more about the religions of the oppressed, he argued. The sociological study of the Tamil Buddhist movement by Aloysius is understood as part of a religiously-expressed emancipatory behaviour of the oppressed everywhere. Hence, it is associated with ideas of anti-hierarchy that offer significant insights for understanding religion for the oppressed and Subaltern.

a. FOREGROUNDING RELIGION

Aloysius treats the movement as an emergence of the hitherto religiously excluded. Hence, the religion of the oppressed is "an ethically ideal world-view" as it embodies an egalitarian social order. Secondly, this religion comes as "an option" – a choice, never a given. People move away, consciously rejecting the ascriptive religion. And thirdly, there is an "emphasis on sociality and collectivity." Celebration becomes central to the religion of the oppressed. It creates "an alternative hegemony" in the cultural and symbolic realm. And lastly, religion becomes an "emancipatory identity," when the new religion is transformed into an identity of the given collectivity as it expresses unity and continuity (Aloysius, 1998:14-20).

Structuring the movement as one of cultural resistance, Aloysius studies religion as a space where the oppressed Subaltern communities – the lower sections – hark back to their tradition of revolt. Religious movements, such as the Tamil Buddhist movement, he argues, seek to redefine, improve upon, consolidate, and legitimize the life-situation of conflicting groups and classes. From conditions of "liminality" to the experience of "relative deprivation," these movements are termed as having a religio-

spiritual dimension that go against "ascriptive hierarchy" – to emancipate oneself from the prison house of religio-cultural slavery (Aloysius, 1998:17).

The later part of the nineteenth century witnessed a social crisis amongst Subaltern groups. The upper castes in the Indian subcontinent had a multifaceted empowerment, which in turn impoverished and degraded the labouring and servile castes during this period. The reason for this, Aloysius argues in his historically informative book, is that "the colonial knowledge production developed a body of knowledge on nature of society, culture and history of the peoples that made caste system and specially the *varna* ideology very popular." It came to wield enormous influence in shaping the "contours of social power relations" in India. However, these discoveries of the Indian past, as argued in the first chapter, were made through a coalition between the British administration and the priestly castes of India. The British administrators were assisted by "collusive construction of ideas and narrations on identities from the native elite" (Aloysius, 1998:42).

In this context, he foregrounds that the Subaltern life-world and their social protests in the nineteenth century were religiously expressed. He finds a pattern in their resistance where religion is often constructed from outside Hinduism – from "an earlier non/anti-Brahminical traditions" of the subcontinent. Secondly, there is also a selective refashioning of several sects of Hindu religion. And lastly, there is an appropriation of religious traditions of a non-Indian origin. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries gave a larger field across the sub-continent where "oppressed castes" subjectively constructed "sacred canopies" within a limited context.[17] However, they were

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[17] Along with the Tamil Buddhist movement, Aloysius particularly mentions about the Sri Narayana Guru Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) amongst Ezhavas of Kerala, the Ayyavazhi of Sri Muthukuttysamy among Shanars of Tamil Nadu, Rajayogi-Mallas, Narsiah sects among Madigas, Bhima Boi and Mahima Dharam among Baunis of Orissa, Matua cult of popular Vaishnavasim, Other "lower" caste Subaltern movements such as – Ramdeo Panth, Satnami, Naval Dharm, and etc. The conversions to Christianity

experientially located, though they expressed through a textual cosmology in print. This aspect of the Subaltern emergence is hardly studied in the Indian context. Aloysius finds fault with the nationalist historians – especially in their study of nationalism – in his *Nationalism Without a Nation in India* (1994). He argues that the nation failed to democratically emerge in India. The colonial elite just transferred the power to the nationalist Brahminical casteist elite. Thus, nationalism on the foundations of Hindu culture, with its caste practices intact, was promoted as unifying Hinduism and the post-colony in India.

Aloysius's work discloses the violence and conspiracy behind the myth of this unification. He states that the emergence of nationalism – of the Hindu kind – in the early twentieth century was a unification of the Brahminical upper castes. This was conspired against the emergence of resistant Subaltern groups across the country as the report goes. It was the forte of the oppressed communities to start-up *Sanghas* and *Sabhas*, write and use print, and engage with religion. It was a communitas of an insurgent kind that politically and culturally engaged with oppression, discrimination, and humiliation – at an ontological level. It paved the way to fashion the idea of being in the world beyond the knowledge that produced caste-based ascriptive life.

Aloysius particularly studies Thass led Tamil Buddhist movement as an emancipatory movement that articulated religion as its political and cultural content. This first study on Thass created a discourse on resistant religious practice, particularly, for the first time in the weekly *Tamizhan*, which came out week after week from 1907

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were in – Brethren church and the *Prathyaksha Raksha Deiva Sabha* in Kerala, "Hindu church" and Salvation Army in Tamil Nadu. These religious movements of colonial India were categorized as religions of the oppressed. They sought, he argues, a "universal-ethics" as a continuity of the age-old heterodox traditions of the subcontinent. They symbolized a life-world were religious cultures were optional and choice-based. They prioritized commitment and congruence which thrusts towards democracy and egalitarianism. An "elective affinity" between Buddhism and the life-world of non-privileged classes (Aloysius, 1998:17-20).

to 1914. The Buddhist *Sanghas* that worked in the Madras presidency, and those which were spread overseas, were also studied. Seemingly, as they independently claimed that the modern day depressed classes were the Buddhists of yore, the Tamil Buddhist movement, Aloysius argues, claimed a discovery of a Tamil past as the community's collective identity. This Buddhist movement, he claims, actualized and symbolized the collective struggles of the oppressed people for social emancipation. Tamil Buddhism was expressed within language, literature, history, and religion in the early twentieth century and it was an expression of an emancipatory identity.

Contextualising the oppressed communities' engagement with modernity, Aloysius shows how oppressed castes used the materials that modernity made available, especially through print. Newspapers and journals have been one of the favourite media of the emerging Subalterns. *Sabhas* and printing presses were involved in creating religious, textual canopies that were in turn becoming very powerful. They became centres of discussion, planning and collective activities. They politically and socially countered myths to create histories about Subaltern groups.

Three main points seem to emerge while understanding Aloysius' study of Thass and the Tamil Buddhist movement. Firstly, Aloysius identifies that there was a community present which was representative of a bigger mass of oppressed people. Secondly, they decided to recognize themselves as Buddhists. He argues that it was certainly an autonomous attempt to rediscover their lost identity, as marginalized people. Thirdly, this group was led by a *Siddha* expert Pandit Iyothee Thass, a renowned scholar of Tamil language and literature, who was also well versed in Pali and Sanskrit. He was an organizational genius and a charismatic figure.

The Buddhist project aspired to construct an alternative hegemonic discourse as an interpretative continuity of the long pre-modern Tamil cultural heritage. The new religion was understood as a religion that directed the oppressed. But it was also open to the entire society. Besides, Aloysius claims that from 1907 to 1914, Thass produced rich interpretative research which was highly original. It contested and invented past while radically interpreting history. This paved way to understand historical research that emphasized religion as an embodied experience for the oppressed.

Aloysius, importantly, lays open how Tamil Buddhism became an antithetical religion of the oppressed. He suggests that Buddhism explored and dwelled on the persistent and meaningful sphere of human symbolism that encompasses and expresses an emergent ethical consciousness. It retained a middle-path between religio-cultural and religious symbolism of the oppressed community. It was a new form of symbolism that expressed collective emancipation. In the struggle against the colonially empowered Brahminism, this project of emancipation was launched by the subalternized communities of northern Tamil Nadu. This was an imagination for a new form of religion and cultural symbolism that expressed collective emancipatory life. This served as a new political meaning to religion as practice.

This inventory religion also came as a response to the fast-changing socio-political situation of the times. The earlier framework of religion and caste for the oppressed was particularly based on rejection, marginalization, dispossession, deprivation, suppression and oppression. The dominant Brahminism executed these both in the sacred and secular spheres. Rejection, however, was countered by equal and opposite rejection of caste by the Tamil Subalterns. They recognized that caste is enslavement. The emancipatory strategies for a religion of the oppressed were opposite to those of the oppressors. Thus, Aloysius argues that caste-lessness became the new

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fundamental tenet of the new emancipatory religion. The value of this religion is marked by its rejection of caste principle. Calling for a casteless fraternity, it envisions a construction of an altogether new society, thereby addressing the existential concerns of the oppressed community.

Aloysius places Tamil Buddhism as a historical legacy from within. It used print media largely to construct a modern organization to reject caste primordiality. He identifies it as a well worked out and multifaceted ideology to interpret history against caste. He also recognized it as an ideological antecedent to Dravidian movement. It brought together a Tamil collective life, literature, culture, religion, and history into one compressed and integrated thesis; while giving a programmatic partnership and mass merger with other movements for emancipation.

b. FOREGROUNDING CULTURE

While Aloysius reads religion as an emancipatory category in the context of oppression and discrimination in India, Dharmaraj's important Tamil book *Naan Poorva Bouddhan* (*I'm an Ancient Buddhist*, 2007) – brings forward a Dalit movement that openly asserted itself as Buddhist in the Tamil-context. Dharmaraj's text is more about the intellectual absent-mindedness of the Dalit-self in socio-cultural movements in Tamil Nadu. His book addresses why and how Thass, as an icon, was conveniently forgotten from the anti-caste intellectual climate of Tamil public sphere. Accounting Thass as a life to be studied, Dharmaraj presents him as a political radical – a life that was marked by a heroic passion for justice and self-respect. He presents interesting details of Thass' multifaceted life as a social revolutionary. His roles as a Buddhist reformer, a journalist, a public intellectual, a Tamil and *Siddha* scholar, were seriously

studied and presented. The Dalit intellectual collectives projected Thass as a re-discovered anti-caste intellectual of the Tamil country – a vernacular hero.

This very interesting narrative, in the long essay format and in simple Tamil, reads like a story and Dharmaraj depicts Thass as participating in a cultural revolution of his times. He presents him as an agent whose politics of culture preceded the claim for a change in governance. His movement is socio-cultural, which is neatly embedded and paralleled with the political emancipation of the people. It is, hence, at once social, cultural, and political emergence of the oppressed people. Dharmaraj also consents, along with Aloysius, that the struggle for Independence in India was a caste conspiracy. This, he argues, was exposed by many a Dalit and "lower" caste intellectuals, like Thass, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thass used it through Tamil Buddhism as a multi-layered informative response to caste and Brahminism. Religion was a field with an expansive imagination where Thass used interpretation as a mode of enquiry and expression.

This religious enquiry – a bulwark against caste and Brahminism – brought out the importance and use of historiographical resources, such as oral narratives, literary movements, Siddha medicine, Tamil linguistics and hermeneutics. Dharmaraj negotiates with the construction of Buddhism against caste – particularly its fight against Brahminism – by the Dalit intellectuals during the twentieth century. Dharmaraj portrays Thass and his writings as an effort to link the Tamil language and Buddhism. Accordingly, it was Thass who claimed that those who were oppressed and discriminated through caste – the Tamils who were treated badly than animals as untouchables – were Buddhists indeed. Hence his struggle was also to prove that Buddhism is a living – and hence not a dead – religion in India. It was indeed a counter-

Tamil identity against and outside caste. In Tamil Buddhism, Thass found and interpreted a caste-less cosmology.[18]

Dharmaraj captures the reason for a century's forgetfulness of Thass in Tamil Nadu (83-94). He exposes the roots of Dravidian movement in the Tamil Buddhist movement, and explains the links Periyar had with it. He accuses that the Tamil intellectual castes negated Thass. Asking the simple question why there is such Dalit anger and distrust on the Dravidian movement and describing how casteist Non-Brahmins had humiliated and discriminated the Dalits as untouchables, he exposes the dominant modes of the Dravidian movement with respect to caste. In many ways, Dharmaraj's Tamil writings, also critically reads Aloysius' study of Thass by foregrounding the Dalit critique of the Non-Brahmin movement. Besides, Thass' enquiry was argued as one that was based on an expansive knowledge in Tamil – Grammar, Siddha medicine, Astrology, and Astronomy. He claims that it was Thass' research into the Tamil language that made him constitute Tamil Buddhism as a vibrant tool against caste.

Thass' interpretation of the literary history and cultural practices of Tamils from a Buddhist perspective gains importance for its non-Hindu and anti-discriminatory content. Along with Ravikumar, Dharmaraj claims that the anti-Brahminism of Thass keeps a distance from the Non-Brahmin movement as it predates Periyar. Much importantly, Thass' cultural critique was rooted within the history of Buddhism and

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[18] Dharmaraj explains the false discourse on Buddhism in the Tamil public sphere during the nineteenth century. Buddhism is understood as an ethics-based disciplinary code that had script and written language. The fault line of Tamil history teaches, exposes Thass, that the defeat of Tamil is due to the Jain and Buddhist encroachment from outside. Vaishnavism and Saivism, invested through Tamil – which was treated as a religion – gave an outsider status to Tamil-Jainism and Buddhism. It was projected that to care for Saivism and Vaishnavism was to care and develop Tamil, Tamil People and Tamil culture. Language, religion, and culture triad was developed to protect caste in the Tamil region. Saivaites and Vaishnavaites used Tamil to develop a canonical triad to protect caste culture. It was, hence, Dalits like Iyothee Thass who used expansive Tamil Buddhism that united *Samanam* (indigenous Jainism) and *Bouddham* (indigenous Buddhism) in Tamil to create a caste-less cosmology (Dharmaraj, 2007:56-82).

Tamil. Hence, while Aloysius's work on Thass foregrounded religion as a category for emancipation from oppression, Dharmaraj's study looked at culture and language as categories, where the foundation for emancipatory politics lay in asserting oneself as a holistic Buddhist. In both these attempts, caste as a category was countered by other emancipatory categories.

c. FOREGROUNDING THOUGHT

Raj Gowthaman's *Iyotheethassar Aaivugal* (*Iyothee Thass' Research*, 2004) studies Thass' work primarily as intellectual history. Hermeneutics and interpretation are used as basis for intellectual thought and discourse to counter-read religion, language, and culture as a kind of politics against caste. This hermeneutics, as read by Gowthaman, placed Thass within a resistant anti-caste Tamil intellectual tradition. Gowthaman historicises Thass as an intellectual who used the print public sphere quite efficiently. He historicises Thass in his times – placing him within the political climate, his contemporaries and Dalit intellectuals of his times – by studying his publishing activity along with the Buddhist revivalist work. His creative interpretations, Gowthaman specifies, have countered the dominant narratives of caste print spheres. The perspective of social imaginaries as histories, like that of *Indhirar Dhesa Sarithiram*, from the most oppressed is presented as a resistant historiography of a kind.

Thass practiced research that was an ethical and political activity. Thass was an extraordinary figure, who was extremely sophisticated at launching a knowledge based resistance, by prioritizing the resources and experiences that he lived as a Tamil Siddha practitioner. In fact, traditions competed to rediscover Buddhism, especially in the twentieth century through Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900), Hermann Oldenberg (1854-1920), Monier-Williams (1819-1899), and Rhys Davis (1843-1922) from

Europe; Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) from Srilanka; Rahul Sankrityayan (1893-1963) and D. Kosambi (1876-1947) from India.

In this context Iyothee Thass, and later Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, could also be accused of creating Buddhism like Christianity and Islam, as they created one founder, one book, one holy language, and one history. However, Gowthaman places them within a critical tradition, one that comes with resistance, in their attempt to reform society, from their locations especially, by reinterpreting and explaining Buddhism. In this content, he found an intellectual working against Brahminism to establish a counter-religion. Gowthaman read Thass' work as an attempt to create untouchables' originary religion by mixing history and imagination as one that invested on a casteless moral imaginary. It truly creates a counter culture.

Gowthaman also places Thass within a Tamil public sphere which was making use of print as a medium to allegedly create a specific cultural lineage from the palm-leaf manuscripts that were being transformed. For instance, U.V. Swaminatha Iyer (1855-1942) published *Manimekalai* (1898) where he translated the available narrative on Buddhism from Rhys Davis, Monier Williams, and Max Mueller, but Gowthaman claims that he hinduized the Buddha.[19] In this depiction of the Buddha, Brahminism was never disturbed and Buddhism was created to protect the caste privileges. Whereas, Maraimalai Adigal (1876-1950) – a Saivaite, an early proponent of "Pure Tamil"

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[19] U.V. Swaminatha Iyer (1855-1942) was a distinguished scholar-editor, who is claimed to have resurrected Tamil's rich ancient literature and cultural heritage from the appalling neglect and destruction. He brought a major bulk of Tamil's ancient and medieval literature – particularly *Sangam* – from palm-leaf manuscripts into print, starting from *Sivakachinthamani* (1887), *Silappadhikaram* (1892), and *Manimekalai* (1898) and so on. Often glaringly celebrated as the deacon of Tamil classical studies, Swaminatha Iyer is credited with studying multiple palm-leaf manuscript, which set him on journeys to comparatively study and fill the gaps in order to eliminate any interpolations. On *Manimekalai*, particularly, Iyer dealt with the Buddhist philosophy, its institutions etc., as if he had nothing to go by at all in Tamil; and as he found no Buddhists at all in the Tamil speaking world nor in the subcontinent, he had to take recourse to some commentaries on *Kundalakesi*, while appending quotes from fifty-nine Tamil works and twenty-nine Sanskrit works and their commentaries to claim an encyclopaedic authority on the text (Lal, 1992:4255-4258).

movement, and an ideologue of the Dravidian nationalist movement – called for the recovery, revival and celebration of an ancient "Non-Brahmin," Tamil language, religion and culture (Venkatachalapathy, 1995; Vaithees, 2014). Adigal described Buddhism as Tamil religion – that valorised and celebrated the "Non-Brahmin" Tamils – especially, without ever looking at it from an anti-caste perspective. Buddhism was used to claim a classical and separate Tamil nationalism resurgently forced by *vellalar* – a dominant, Non-Brahmin, land-holding caste – movement and Saivism. Similarly, Gowthaman identifies that atheistic Self-Respect and Dravidian-Shudra movements too used Buddhism for its political and cultural content.[20]

However, Gowthaman argues that even before the term "engaged Buddhism" came up in the 1960s, the oppressed Dalits had reworked on a Buddhist identity in a very engaging way. They developed it as a new religious tradition. Thass engaged with other Tamil Buddhists such as P. Lakshmi Narasu and M. Singaravelu along with Theosophical Society's Olcott, Blavatsky, and Dharmapala, in their work for other oppressed Dalits. Thass also founded the "South Indian Buddhist Associations" and "Sakhya Buddhist *Sangams*," while recreating Buddhism through traditional Tamil grammar, literature, ethics, culture, and history but also as an existential religious route.

Gowthaman finds a fundamental difference between Thass and Lakshmi Narasu – the professor from Madras who was a pioneer to research and write on Buddhism in English, particularly, *The Essence of Buddhism* (1907), which inspired Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Gowthaman argues that though Narasu had a specific critique of the Hinduized Buddhism, Thass however strongly contests it. Any rationalistic proposition of Buddhism that rejects a corporal practise of religion is not Buddhism for Thass. In

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[20] Maraimalai Adigal's works seem to have envisioned a religious pre-history to the radical Dravidian or "Tamil-only" movement. In this his attempt was also to see the writings within a dominant caste (*Vellalar*) perspective, while celebrating a "Non-Brahmin" cultural and social world (Vaithees, 2014).

many ways, Gowthaman states that Thass' Buddhism was very different from what others were doing at the same time.[21] Thass was acting during a socio-historical context where both British imperialistic trend and the Brahminized elite merged. Even assertion against colonial domination took the shape of the casteist, Brahminized, Hindu nationalism. R. Sundaralingam designates that the period 1820 to 1890 made the Brahmins very powerful in the subcontinent. The reasons he attributes for this power-shift are – "religious and socio-cultural hegemony, the change in agrarian economy coupled by governmental power both administrative and state" (Sundaralingam, 1974:68).

However, this period also saw a mushrooming of many societies and journals. Of importance is the Theosophical Society that shifted its base to Adyar, Madras in 1882. It was mostly supported by the Indian governmental gentry. However, there is a specific link between the work of colonel Olcott and work on Tamil Buddhism. The society, under the leadership of both Olcott and Blavatsky, started schools for Dalits. Until 1907 – before the death of Olcott and the shift of leadership to Annie Besant – Thass had maintained a close relationship with them. Thass met Olcott during the years 1896 to 1898. He starts the South Indian Sakhya Buddhist Sangha in 1898, and the South Indian Buddhist Sangha from 1898 to 1907. SIBAs were established in Marikuppam (Kolar Gold Field), Bangalore, and Hubli apart from North Arcot, Madras, Royapeta, Perambur, and Rangoon. Thass was a pioneer in converting many depressed classes to Buddhism in these cities through the work of these societies (Kshirsagar, 1994:387). These centers became catalysts for transformation of anti-caste politicization and cultural content of Dalits.

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[21] Lakshmi Narasu created an engaged Buddhism that is modern and scientific. It became a tool for opposing caste, religion, and Vedic Brahminism through a scientific religion. However, Thass at the same time built another Buddhism with a different content. Gowthaman accounts their differences, along with the basic principles forwarded by Lakshmi Narasu (Gowthaman, 2004: 32-65).

Thass worked in these societies first, working among Dalits, and then starts his journal *Tamizhan* in 1907 when colonel Olcott died. The *Sanghas* were started in Madras, Perambur, and the Kolar Gold Fields where the oppressed communities had migrated. They had settled down in these industrial towns during the colonial period. The journal that came to these societies as a declaration to claim the religion of the caste-less Dravidians to counter Brahminism. Thass variably used the ancient Tamil epics, literature, Buddhist books and oral narratives to constitute Buddhism as the original religion of the most oppressed – the ones who were the most affected by caste (Gowthaman, 2004:70).

He had to categorically differentiate the idea of religion as caste-less – to place the experiential view of the most oppressed by caste at the center. He differentiated Buddhism from the religion of the Saivaites and Vaishnavaites. He broke the essential Orientalist construction that non-Christian, non-Muslim, and non-Sikh people are Hindus. He requested the oppressed Tamils to register as "original Tamils" in the 1881 census of the colonial state. From 1911 to 1921, especially after the death of Thass, Dravidian Buddhist numbers increased. It was during this time that Mysore and the Kolar Gold Field played a significant role in spreading Buddhism and education amongst the oppressed communities. Monks from Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, and Siam preached at Kolar Gold Field.

It was through libraries and printing press that this transformation could be engineered by Thass. Marikuppam, for instance, had a library and a Buddhist research centre. Not only did they become pioneering discussion forums on caste rejection, but also initiated self-respect marriages. They used the books – *Thirukural* and *Dhammapadam* during the wedding ceremonies. Thass' books did a cultural awakening at the level of writing. His books *Buddharadhu Aadhivedham* and *Indhirar Dhesa*

Sarithiram are interesting treatises on history and religion. By reconstructing myths and legends from an anti-caste location, Thass continuously debated with the brahminisation of Tamil and Indian history by the Tamil weekly *Swadesamitran* and *India* (Gowthaman, 2004:70-75).

Interestingly, Thass had also raised questions about caste in the context of South Africa. He particularly contested the complaints that Indians reported on being discriminated differentially in the journals. He compared it with other reports where Dalits were portrayed in a very bad light. His writings against caste were generated from informative political circles. It was during the British rule that Dalits worked and progressed as butlers, watchmen, medicants, and worked in hospitals, railways, and the military. Thass could work among them and write, while using resurgent Buddhism, education, medicine (*Siddha*), and journalism as basic frames. This was transforming him into an intellectual who foregrounded a civilizational memory that rooted in a treatise of ethics. Buddhism was not only propounded as an alternative within vernacular (Tamil) to Brahminical violence, but also its ideological frames were rooted in a textuality of non-violence.

Thass' intellectual enterprise is an effort to contest history and reject the fatal hermeneutics of birth-centrism. Along with the Dalits of his time, his work primarily described a desire for a just world that is against birth-sanctioned Brahminism. The societies, *sabhas* and *sanghas* – a communitas of a kind – that were formed during this time, fundamentally, mobilized the Dalits to seek emancipation from the resources that they possessed. In other words, they operated from within – where Buddhism was sought as a textual resource towards a self-emancipation (Gowthaman, 2004:81).

There were external reasons for the changes of the Dalit communities within, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but Thass does not concentrate on them much.[22] Though the colonial British imperialist policies were the reasons for many famines in India, he however critiqued and condemned casteism in India for contributing to this. Dalits in the Tamil regions are caste-less Dravidians, he claimed. Though violated, Thass constructed a positive language of civil rights amidst the dominant discourse of humiliation, especially, when Dalits were discriminated in the public. Thass took it on himself to create an alternative discourse through print.

In this venture, though Thass appreciated the specific work done by the Christian missionaries in the upliftment of the oppressed Tamils, he rejected caste Christianity. He also rejected conversions to Christianity and Islam, while refuting blood sacrifice, deity worship, and ritual sacrifice. He opposed self-rule, *swarajya* movement, and the congress. He imagined an innovative but meaningful education system. Demanding land and education to the Dalits, Thass insisted on transformation than reforms. In many ways, Gowthaman places Thass as far more progressive than Ramalingar – the reformer, and Subramaniya Bharathi – the poet-patriot. In a riveting critique, he explained that Eurasians, Muslims, self-respecting Christians, and casteless Dravidians would reject *Vande Mataram* and *Bharat Mata Ki Jai* as Hindu *swadeshi* communalist propaganda (*T,* Vol. 1, 1908:52) and he rejected nationalism and the freedom movement.

In his rejection of the so-called *Swadeshi* movement, Thass foregrounded that those who cannot treat human beings as human so as to better oneself but oppress the

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[22] Gowthaman refers to the contributions made by European intellectuals, Christian missionaries, the governmental decree that considered man in his autonomy as a scale for governance, British law, fertilization, education, cities and industrial employment, democratic set-up shook the bases of caste and, particularly, Brahminism. The oppressed and caste-Subalterns particularly benefitted out of these changes. This, in turn, increased caste-violence on Dalits during this period (Gowthaman, 2004:81).

other, cannot be called self-rulers. And he proclaimed that the only real swarajists are the indigenous people of this country. Buddhism, hence, is proposed as an overwhelming emancipatory category which is primarily caste-less. The question of the genuine religion emerges within the realm of culture, coupled by an outright political rejection of Brahminism. Even if this is imitated by a Non-Brahmin conglomeration, the link between caste-religious traditions, which is Brahminism, is useless and should be overthrown, he insisted.

Raj Gowthaman rightly criticizes, in his own wit, and shares the Dalit critique of the Dravidian movement. He asks whether the Non-Brahmin atheists contested and annihilated caste-religious traditions which were propagated by the Brahmins. In other words, has the Non-Brahmin conglomeration de-brahminized themselves? In a way, he did not differentiate too much from the Dalit critiques on the Non-Brahmin category and identity. In fact, he places Thass at the centre of the critique against the Non-Brahmin Dravidian movement.

In a rather prolific critique and self-introspection, it was G. Aloysius who clearly states that even "the later *Tamizhan*'s resentment on the Dravidian-Self Respect movement," after Thass, and "the generosity which the Tamil Buddhist movement showed on other anti-caste movements were not sufficiently reciprocated" (Aloysius, 2010:270-271). Accordingly, the self-respect movement, he claims, was not always forthcoming in censuring the Non-Brahmin caste atrocities on the *Adi-Dravidas*. *Tamizhan*, the journal, and the anti-caste movement by the Tamil Buddhists became an inferior partner, and a Brahminical pattern of power congruence seem to work as caste-power among the Non-Brahmin conglomerates, particularly against the *Adi-Dravida*s. Hence the primary goal of the anti-caste movement that is "the abolition of caste," got relegated (Aloysius, 2010:270). He suggests, however, that Thass' movement was a

scintillating attack on the abolition of caste and *varna* that would secure a holistic transformation for its worst victims. Its relegation hence would affect the most. Though an active and hegemonic presence of the dominant forces engaged in the ceaseless process of thwarting or co-opting the Subaltern agenda, Aloysius argues that "an effective and inclusive identity was instituted throughout the life of the journal" (272).

However, as numerous changes – both cultural and structural – finally came to mark the social polity of the sub-continent from the 1930s onwards, the political emergence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar shifted quite a lot of ground, at least for the Subalterns. The emergence of a powerful voice identified with the larger struggling mass everywhere. However, Aloysius suggests that "the Dravidian Self-Respect movement itself was an edifice constructed on the foundations laid much earlier by castes and communities far below the social scale than those which eventually came to constitute it" (269). However, Thass' "comprehensive, coherent, and compelling re-iteration" did destabilize the dominant discourse of the time within the Tamil-speaking world. It indeed laid the moral-intellectual foundations of anti-caste and mobilized the larger Tamil/Dravidian population as such. Aloysius claims this as "a new self-identification" (271).

d. FOREGROUNDING CONSCIOUSNESS

Gajendran Ayyathurai, in turn, concretely supports this argument to understand the Tamil Buddhist as an emancipated identity particularly founded on anti-caste consciousness. He argues that the *Tamizhan* archives (1907-1914) reveal three discursive modes of identification namely – oppositional, re-constructional and representational.[23] He systematically studies the movement and suggest that these

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[23] Ayyathurai delineates these three modes of self-identification and perception as – firstly, that the marginalized communities, such as the Parayars, discursively opposed their subjugation in anti-caste

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modes are 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, Parayars and so on. Rather, these are, he states, "articulations about the self-perception and self-identity of such people beyond the terms of caste" (Ayyathurai, 2011:213).

He suggests that this Subaltern consciousness emerged at a time when civil society was dominated by three axes of power – first, the Brahmin "brokered, glibly secular, nationalist movement" (213). Secondly, an emergent Non-Brahmin upper-caste movement to displace the Brahmins and thirdly, the scholarly world which was dominated by colonialists, Orientalists, and nationalists which assumed the inabilities of Dalits (213-214). Hence, this movement, he states, worked against the scholarly world by critically exposing their social conditions, while continuously speaking and writing about them. He contrasts by stating that the Tamil Buddhists demonstrated their "anti-caste *imaginare* discursively, to compel us to rethink the way the marginalized of the caste system are viewed" (214). Hence, their stand point of Tamil Buddhism was against the caste system; their anti-caste consciousness and religion was inclusive and open to people irrespective of their linguistic and ex-caste status.

Moreover, Ayyathurai hints that a holistic view of Thass places him as "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" (215). Therefore, his primarily goal, annihilation of caste was inseparably linked with reorganizing the

terms against both caste and colonial power of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Secondly, they went on to reject the classifications made by caste and colonial authorities as Parayars, and re-articulated themselves as Tamil Buddhists in a variety of ways as they established a positive collective identity and history. And thirdly, they shaped their material histories and potentialities through conventional practices of petitioning the colonial government, but also by mobilizing their own resources to establish inclusive casteless institutions of social change (Ayyathurai, 2011).

land to which he belonged, which was mediated through what he saw around the world. Thass, hence, took up Buddhism as the most viable religion that could open up the possibility of a casteless nation. Ayyathurai further builds the argument that Thass' understanding of Buddhism was actually transnational, though founded particularly in Tamil. He unveils an openness to other "nations" and cultures. This propels against a ritualized Tamil nationalism that encourage orthodoxies and divisions between women and men. Hence, Ayyathurai claims that Thass cannot be a religious nationalist.

Importantly, he theorizes that Thass' Tamil Buddhism constructed a political identity including religious and linguistic elements that would enable an inclusionary collective and a casteless society. Hence, Thass was not a Dravidian nationalist as well. However, Thass viewed Buddhism as an anti-caste way of life in the subcontinent, but "insisted on regionalizing Buddhism in the lingua franca, instead of any other language of the past or present hegemony" (Ayyathurai, 2011:217). Hence, Ayyathurai states that Thass is not a rabid nationalist because he advocates intermixtures between people and linguistic diversity.

Lastly to summarize the take on the Dravidian movement, Ayyathurai argues that the Buddhist movement of Thass and his associates took two different routes. Firstly, there are generations that followed Thass which have continued to hold onto ideas of Tamil Buddhism to the present. They trace their legacy as "decendants" of Tamil Buddhism (Ayyathurai: 218). On the other hand, he states that, it influenced two strands of the "Non-Brahmin movement" – the Saivaite self-respecters and the Self-Respect movement itself.[24] However, Thass' venture into the notions of ethics, caste-

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[24] Ayyathurai states that the Tamil Saivaite movement through Vedachalam's books such as *Tamizhar Madham* (1941) internalized Tamil Buddhist ideas such as anti-caste and anti-Brahmin vibes, and particularly the significance of Tamil as a vehicle of caste-lessness. It wanted to create a Saivaite effect on the basis of Tamil Buddhist arguments, he argues. However, despite its postures, Vedachalam upholds caste divisions among those he calls Non-Brahmins; notably the Parayars are put back in the most

lessness, and critical humanism need investigation in the context where "Non-Brahmin politics has lent itself to accommodating various castes other than the Brahmins, particularly those who stand against social transformation of the most oppressed" – the Dalits (Ayyathurai: 220).

Taking this a little forward, Thass tried to conceptualize an anti-caste communitas as a way of caste-less life against Brahminism or caste-immunitas, which was possible through recovering from history a Buddhism in the Tamil language. The texts on Buddhism and history, particularly, *Indhirar Dhesa Sarithiram* (*The History of Indhirar Country*, 2010) calls for a serious study to critically evaluate caste-lessness in the vernacular. These texts were written to reconstruct a critical anti-caste tradition as a Buddhist way of life. This leads one to think that the anti-caste intellectual thought that the Dalit intellectuals produced in the early twentieth century had a counter view on caste and religion. In this, they were making a civilizational claim. Thass, thorough his Buddhist writings, reworked a genealogy of loss. However, he recovers it thorough a civilizational memory in Tamil Buddhism – a civilizational claim against caste that envisions a post-caste imaginary as genealogy.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

This chapter captured the academic discourse of Thass within Tamil and anti-caste studies and highlights the case for a rereading of his texts for the political present. It laid out the debates that had happened within the English academia and the Tamil public sphere and studied Thass as discourse and critique through three trajectories – as

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marginalized state in much the same ways as the Brahmins did, he continues. Hence, the Tamizhar of the Saivaite movement and Vedachalam was not caste-free despite the traces of Tamil Buddhist ideas, he claims. In the case of the Self-Respect movement, Ayyathurai states firmly going through the archival proofs that, many of Periyar's views on idol worship, religious superstitions, gender issues, on the one hand, and welcoming science and technologies as a way out of caste, religious obscurantism, and poverty in India, on the other, resonate with the articulations of Thass (218-219).

Non-Brahmin discourse, as Orientalist discourse, and Anti-Caste critique. The chapter discussed how Thass was made part of an anti-caste discourse as a memory and as a part of Dalit intellectual legacy in the vernacular during the 1990s, where new radical anti-caste figures, such as Thass were discovered. Besides, the chapter also suggested that a hermeneutics of experience and community would offer a different way to study Thass' writings and argued why religious texts that were produced by Thass should be taken seriously conceptualize an open, caste-less community in practice.

While scholars have debated over this anti-caste legacy, it is also true that an insistence on studying Ambedkar as the only anti-caste philosopher singularly for a nationalist and/or post-colonialist political thought, or even the Dravidian ideologues as exemplars of Self-Respect movement for the Tamil country, seem to cut-short the genealogy on which anti-caste thoughts stand on. In fact, an attempt to even conceptualize the deadly attack on Brahminism and Hinduism through Thass' writings on Buddhism are rarely highlighted. One needs to conceptualize the radical anti-caste thought that expressed itself through religion as a civilizational claim and expression over a coming community. Hence a radical rereading of past through history as pedagogy is to be practiced. The chapter that follows would primarily evaluate how Thass worked with texts that constituted caste-lessness through religion, particularly, Buddhism in the vernacular – here Tamil.

CHAPTER FOUR

CASTE-LESS HISTORY AND COMMUNITY: *INDHIRAR DHESAM*

AND BUDDHISM

This chapter extends the discussion from the third chapter and critically evaluates Thass' exploration with history and religion, particularly foregrounding his book *Indhirar Dhesa Sarithiram* (*The History of Indhirar Country*, 2010). I suggest that Thass produces a critical anti-caste communitas in writing. The chapter, therefore, contextualises the text, along with *Tamizhan* archives, to understand how Thass envisions an anti-caste history and religion through a creative use of hermeneutics. I also argue that communitas as a concept emerges in Thass' imaginative exercise of history and thought. Meanwhile, this chapter also draws an outline of Thass' life and times – his writings in the context of the emergent anti-caste print public sphere, and his interesting textuality of Buddhism for a caste-less community in Tamil. The chapter engages with Thass' Buddhists texts to discuss his dialectical hermeneutics in the early twentieth century, and highlight how this produced an anti-caste print world which significantly contested the textualities of caste.

THASS' WRITINGS

Anbu Ponnovium, one of the earlier followers of Tamil Buddhism who had preserved the *Tamizhan* archives,[1] records that Thass and his work must be understood in the

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[1] Thass' quotations from the *Tamizhan* archives, including those cited in Ponnovium (1999) and Gowthaman (2004), and from the book Iyotheethaasa Pandithar's *Indhirar Dhesa Sarithiram* (2010) are translated into English by me. The references from *Tamizhan* archives are taken from Aloysius' three edited volumes (1999 and 2003), and they would be cited as *T* with their corresponding volume number and page numbers in this chapter.

context of the *Adi-Dravidar*'s contribution to Tamil in the nineteenth century. He claims that many poets, artists, spokespersons, and writers were present among the *Adi-Dravida*s; and they emphatically contributed towards society, religion, literature, politics, history, work, rationality, and reformation in that context. Ponnovium argues that Thass belongs to a continuum of Dalit intellectuals that produced Rettaimalai Srinivasan, M.C. Rajah, and N. Sivaraj (xxiv). Hence, he states that the *Adi-Dravida* emergence was a revolt, and it was foundational to the Dravidian movement that followed later. Thass belonged to the nineteenth century anti-caste public sphere. This was long before the Non-Brahmin movement even started in 1916 where the *Adi-Dravidas*, he claims, ran umpteen *sanghas* and *sabhas*.[2]

Ponnovium also records that the Subalterns not only worked with a single leader, but also as collectives expressing their requests, problems, and petitions through running journals. *Adi Dravida Maha Vigada Thoodhan*, *Poologa Vyasan*, *Paraiyan*, and *Adi-Dravida Mitran* were names of journals that were run by the *Adi-Dravidas* from 1860 to 1910.[3] Poems, essays, and plays that were written in these journals are completely lost now. Though the activities of the anti-caste, Subaltern public sphere was not historically documented, Ponnovium states that not only *Tamizhan* – run under Thass from Madras, G. Appaduraiyar from Kolar, and later by P.M. Rajarathinam – but also books such as *Madurai Prabhandham* and *Rangoon Pravesa Thirattu* – published by Pulavar Pudhuvai Seyyappa Mudhaliar in 1896 – had carried information about the

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[2] Ponnovium accounts that *Adi-Dravida Jana Sabhai,* which was registered in 1892, was first run even before the Non-Brahmin conglomeration started. Thereafter it was followed by *Adi-Dravida Maha Jana Sabai* in 1916, and All India *Adi Dravida Maha Jana Sabai* in 1928. They were mostly run as grass roots organizations not only for civic and social rights, but also for rights for political representations (Ponnovium, 1999:xxiv).
[3] For the first time, in the context of the lack of history on the Dalits and the print-public sphere in the colonial period, Historian Balasubramaniam brings out the 74 year old history (1869-1943) of Dalits' engagement with modern-print in the Tamil country in his recent book (in Tamil). The monograph is titled *Suriyodhayam Mudhal Udhaya Sooryan Varai: Dalith Idhalgal, 1869-1943* (*From Suriyodhayam to Udhaya Sooryan: Dalit Journals, 1869-1943*, 2017).

Adi-Dravida anti caste public sphere (xxv). This is supported by Aloysius who suggests that the Subaltern classes of northern Tamil Nadu, particularly Dalits, "showed definite signs of awakening and incipient mobilization in the last quarter of the nineteenth century" (Aloysius, 2010:240).

Aloysius also suggests that apart from their emergence during the colonial period (as discussed in the previous chapters), "the Parayars also constituted an important segment of the population and they wielded power in the pre-modern culture and knowledge spheres." Particularly, in their access to "Tamil literature, medicine, and traditions that practice several forms of asceticism" (Aloysius, 2010:239). Dalits, in late colonialism, took to the printed word as a means of socio-political as well as religio-cultural awakening and mobilization. Hence, it could be argued that Dalits through their activities in the public sphere indeed belied the timeless "depressedness" attributed to them, through sheer production of the word (Perumal, 2000; Balasubramaniam, 2016, 2017).

It is also suggested that the *Adi-Dravida* intellectuals, who created this public sphere, extremely debated and countered each other.[4] Particularly, Thass had problems with Rettaimalai Srinivasan, so too with poet Gangadhara Navalar, Advaidananda Swamigal, Omprakash Swami, reverend John Rathinam, and poet Velayutham.[5] All of them researched in Tamil and particularly created a contesting Dalit public sphere,

[4] In 1891, Rettaimalai Srinivasan started the *Paraiyar Mahajana Sabha* and Thass started the *Dravida Mahajana Sabha*. Though both were relatives, Thass filed a petition against Srinivasan's journal *Paraiyan* for using the term in contempt and for hurting the sentiments of the people. Aloysius argues that "a very debatable Parayar-political emerged, and that a possible rivalry between both the leaders" also started along with that. Srinivasan was the foremost critique of Iyothee Thass, as "*Tamizhan* carried on a relentless hermeneutical battle against Paraiyar as a word to collectively identify the Subaltern communities" (Aloysius, 2010:241).

[5] It is important to note that there emerged the first generation of leadership within the Dalit community in the early twentieth century – R. Srinivasan, Swami Sahajananda, M.C. Rajah, Veeraiyan, L.C. Guruswamy, Madurai Pillay, V.G. Vasudev Pillay, Appaduraiyar, Annapoorani Ammal, V.I. Munusamy Pillai, Periyasamy Pulavar, N. Sivaraj, Meenambal Sivaraj, and B.M. Rajarathinam. This crop of Subaltern leaders and their organization preceded the Non-Brahmin movement that produced different kind of leaders, and they had advocated a much more inclusive identity (Aloysius, 2010:259).

where they differed with each other yet they were very productive in their writings (Ponnovium: xxvi). As they were critically different from each other in their claims and research, it is also to be noted that Thass' research and thoughts were largely based on literature, history, and ethics in the Tamil language. He treated the Tamil language as an embodiment of thought and practice using it as an archive for an anti-caste intellectual production of religion.

Using Tamil resources and oral practices, Thass claimed that the indigenous/original Tamils (*poorva/aadhi Tamizhar*) were particularly those who were in the contemporary times abused as untouchables. These are the same people, he claims, who came to work for the transformation and well-being of the land. Hence, he claims that Hinduism as Brahminism and Aryanism is a foreign import that had particularly deceived the original truth of the land (Ponnovium: xxviii). Thass claims that caste is untruth, and a religion that spreads this untruth is unethical. He fought, hence, an epistemological war against Brahminism. This is embodied through Buddhism in Tamil as an ethical practice of life. It could be argued that Thass proposed Buddhism as envisioning a communitas at hand, which treats caste and Brahminism as immunitas.

Thass propounded such a critique on the emergent Indian National Congress as well, in the late nineteenth century. For instance, Thass contests the self-rule movement of the *Swadeshis* in 1885, spear headed by Victor Hume's National Congress, by stating that the so called "backward and oppressed" people do not believe in *swadeshi* reform. He states that "these Hindu *swadeshi* reformists only talk about unity despite caste differences. They do not want to eradicate caste at all. They talk about caste differences only to bring together the *brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya,* and the *shudra* together" (*T*, 27.5.1908, cited in Ponnovium: xxix). He proposed that in this immunization project

transformation is impossible, as the upper caste would not treat equally the oppressed or lowered groups, as their elevation or protection is based on the others elimination. Hence the *Adi-Dravida* intellectuals claim a distinctive civilization as their own, which to them is much egalitarian and humanistic than the caste-immunitas of Brahminism. The claims for such a civilizational communitas was done through creating particularly *sanghas* and *sabhas* against caste and Brahminism.

On further research, it is indeed very clear that Thass through his grass-root movement claimed that the caste-immunized Brahminical civil society that emerged as *swadeshi* reform is a self-centered destruction. He asks the *Adi-Dravida*s, therefore, to keep themselves "away from the nationalist movement represented particularly by the nationalist congress in its inception" (*ibid*). He states that the nationalist movement is against education, against thought, has no compassion, discipline, unity, and integrity. Much strongly, Thass uses the violent metaphor "impalement" (*kazhuvu etrudhal*), through which the Buddhists and Jains were exterminated from the Indian subcontinent. He warns the *Adi-Dravidas* that "the *swadeshis* would in fact impale them if they go along with them" (*ibid*).

Thass further asks "how the people who protected the texts from being accessed by others, by rejecting access to read and write can have compassion for an other" (*T,* 16.10.1912, quoted in Ponnovium: xxxiv). He places the *swadeshi* reform as deceptively pulling one back to a violent immunization, and ultimate impalement of the masses in the country. Hence, as a contestation of a kind against the "selfish *swadeshis*," he suggests that the "untouchables" and the "lowered" communities would fare better "if they remain working in English man's houses, administration, industries, and plantations." He warns, "how could a political community that intends to impale people through an idea of eternal law (*sanatana dharma*), and through unchanging

concepts of God that were produced to create, protect, and destroy can invariably lead everyone towards ethical action" (*T*, 02.10.1912, cited in Ponnovium: xxxiii).[6]

Interestingly, Thass uses Tamil as a field to reclaim ethics as a way of life. He counters the religionist and caste extremist assault on the language during the nineteenth century Tamil scholarship. He states that "by using the resources in Tamil languages, scholars have multiplied their caste-masks, spoken lies, professed religious shops, and have earned their wealth." Accordingly, he bases his argument that not only "important memorials of caste-less historical material such as the *viharas* were destroyed," but also "knowledge resources such as the palm scripts were appropriated" (*T*, 12.3.1913, cited in Ponnovium: xxxvii). Hence, he suggests that even Tamil along with Sanskrit and Pali, languages that were used to propagate ethics, were appropriated for the service of caste and Brahminism – towards unethical falsehoods.

Moreover, Thass argues that those who were most oppressed and discriminated by caste – the untouchables – have still preserved the literature, art, and medicinal knowledge. These earlier forms of anti-caste intellectual properties that were based on ethical action, he suggests must be taken back and reprinted. The law texts, wisdom books, and astronomical texts that the *Adi-Dravida*s claimed possession could be read as a civilizational memory that counters violation as a process. In some way, this claim

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[6] Thass asks clearly that if somebody writes, talks, and acts consciously it would necessarily "take them towards a way that is ethical (principles) in nature, and never towards unethical (dogmatic) actions" (*maravazhikkinri, ara vazhikae izhuthuchella vendum*). In this statement, he accuses *Ramayana* and *Mahabaratha* that were reproduced as nationalist religious texts as not taking anyone towards ethical action. He asks can war be celebrated as civilizational culture in these texts. Does killing entail justice? He claims that discipline, ethical action, and violence-free culture cannot be embodied in a culture of violence, violation, and stealth. Hence he forthrightly rejects that cultural politics of *swarajya* that promotes *Ramayana* and *Mahabaratha* for its reason being that it is simply unjust (*T,* 26.3.1913, cited in Ponnovium: xxxv).

for a civilizational relationship with the Tamil language is a unique claim during the colonial period, come as it may, from a Dalit intellectual in the early twentieth century.[7]

For instance, his writings on literature – *Ilakkiyam*, starts with his commentaries on Valluva Nayanar's *Thirikural* (*Thirukkural*) (*T*, Vol. 2: 455 and 566-779); Auvaiyar's *Thirivasagam* (*Thiruvasagam*) (*T,* Vol. 2: 456), *Kundalakesi* (*T,* Vol. 2: 537), *Thenbavani* (*T*, Vol. 2: 537), *Manimegalai* (*T*, Vol. 2: 556), and *Siddhar Padalgal* (*T,* Vol. 2: 557) along with the discussion on their publication history. These literary criticisms in *Tamizhan* (*Iyothee Thassar Sindhanaigal*, Vol. 2, Ed., G. Aloysius, 1999) are an alternative attempt at historical method itself. It is worth to study the intermediary space that Thass was exploring, while commenting and writing on *Thirukkural*, which was first published into print by Francis Whyte Ellis, in 1831. The print history and subsequent commentaries of *Kural* opened a vociferous public debate over literary historiography. Thass in his *Tamizhan* from the June 1908 to 1914, till his death, continuously published articles on the *Kural* by retrieving material, interpreting the verses, giving references, deriving etymological meanings, introducing new texts, commentaries and figures to recover *Kural* and *Valluvar* from the caste-biography that was published as print history.

In this attempt, Thass counters and discusses the biographical details of *Valluvar* and argues his case for retrieval. Thass inter-refers verses from texts such as *Munkalaitivagaram*, *Pinkalai Nigandu*, *Manimekalai*, *Sivagasindhamani*, *Sulamani* among others, to explain and construct an alternative reading of the given caste history.

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[7] Thass claims that his grand-father Kandappan who worked as a butler to George Harrington, who was a close friend of F.W. Ellis, had given the palm-scripts of *Thirukural* and *Naaladi Nanooru* from *Sangam* literature around the year 1812 for the college at Fort St. George's work on the "Dravidian proof." Besides Thass highlights that the *Adi-Dravida*s contributed to this Tamil legacy, and therefore, suggesting that this was in continuity to the work of the Dravidian scholarship and the *Adi-Dravida*s relationship with the British in this front. Thass also wanted the Tamil letters to be reduced to make it pragmatically useful for print which eventually happened during the Dravidian movement after 1930s (*T*, 25.2.1914, cited in Ponnovium: xxxvii).

For instance, Thass rejects the title *Thirukkural* (The Holy Voice – *Thiru* +*Kural*; *Thiru* is an honorific affix which may mean divine). Instead he gives a Buddhist interpretation to the *Kural*. He explains it as *Thiri Kural*, where *thiri* means three *pitakas* of the *Dhamma* doctrine namely – ethics (*Arathupal*), material (*Porutpal*), and love (*Kamathupal*). *Kural* is hence divided into three parts called *Muppal*. This explanation gives an opportunity, for Thass, to demonstrate with resources the Buddhist origins of *Valluva Nayanar*, the author of the *Kural*. Thass is apparently waging an intellectual battle single-handedly with the Saivaite pandits, of his times – of their claims over *Valluvar* as well as *Auvaiyar*. Hence through the poetic references and quotations Thass literally weaves an intellectual project of retrieval, contestation, re-reading, and imagining an anti-caste (political) legacy (tradition), through journalistic prose.

Thass suggests that texts which the most oppressed possess, in fact, generate the practice of knowledge (*vithai*), rationality (*butthi*), generosity (*eegai*), and right path (*sanmarkam*) among everyone. Brahminism and the caste society have only celebrated falsehood, violence, and ignorance not only by destroying this legacy, but have also classified these people as untouchables and *panchamas* (Ponnovium: xIi). Thass therefore claims that the most oppressed are indeed "killed without killing" by the caste extremists who just generate falsehood. He calls "the national congress as fake and dominated by caste-masked reformists" (*T*, 24.12.1913; 07.01.1914, cited in Ponnovium: xIi). In this attempt, Thass suggests that the most oppressed have found better life by migrating out of their places. Thass inaugurates and remembers a casteless community in Tamil civilization through non-violence, compassion, and right path. Thass researches and writes about this Buddhist communitas to field it against caste-immunitas that sanitizes life and kills it without any kindness and thoughtfulness (Ponnovium: xIv).

WRITING A WORLD OUTSIDE CASTE

For Thass, critiquing caste and creating an anti-caste community imaginary was not just to portray the Brahmin as a figure of scorn with an appropriated ideal status. It was a subversive attempt to create a textuality that refutes, to create a religion and culture against caste. Not only interpreting that the metaphysics of caste as an enforced hierarchy remained largely intact in Thass, but reading his discourses as only underscoring the continuing power of the Brahmin in the Tamil context is more than vindictive. Hence renowned scholars, as discussed in the third chapter, refused to acknowledge that not just "Non-Brahmin," but an anti-caste critique has a long historical significance, though a discontinuous one, and various Dalits were indeed its active participants.

Thass engages with Tamil-print in the early twentieth century as he ran the magazine *Tamizhan* which revived interest on Buddhism as an anti-caste religion. The magazine was extremely instrumental in creating an anti-caste vernacular-cosmology of those times. Thass was an intellectual – an expert reader, referee, writer, polyglot, publisher, and organizer; and he initiated a resistant knowledge practice, by using journalism, as a tool to gain inroads into the print public sphere, which was undeniably caste-ridden. Forty-two such Tamil journals – by Dalits – were run from 1850 to 1947 in the Madras presidency (Balasubramaniam, 2016, 2017). Why such an event in print history is erased in public memory calls for a serious enquiry. Particularly the role of academics and history-writing in India calls for a critical anti-caste perspective. Hence a revisit, so as to re-evaluate that historical moment of erasure, is imperative to capture the prolific Dalit participation and contribution to emancipatory knowledge practice in print-language.

Thass not only wrote about a specific Parayar community's possession of cultural material, but also refused the socio-political principle of mass exclusion of any community. Particularly, he refuted any possibility of untouchability as a sanction for eternity. Hence Thass simultaneously deconstructed and reconstructed identifications for an anti-caste community, as he forthrightly rejected the terms *panchamas* and untouchables. Thass' methodology was historicisation, where he contextualized the history that was projected by the dominant as meta-historical or culturally essentialist (Aloysius, 2010:245). However, one should add that this historical interpretation was also aided by multi-level critical hermeneutics and textual exegesis. In fact, Thass primarily deconstructed the new socio-political identification that had emerged in the public domain during the late nineteenth century. He critically deployed his own argument and established his concerns by drawing upon Orientalism, though not imitating the Orientalists. Hence, he brought to surface many hidden tensions inherent in the very conditions of Subalternity.[8]

In a very sophisticated manner, Aloysius suggests that the basic forces that constructed Thass' Buddhism is *Sramanic* in nature, which was different from the *Brahmana* tradition, where Buddhists attained the pinnacle of achievement. This set up an ideal in the social life of the people which was fundamentally against the antagonistic Brahminical socio-religious ideology. Aloysius suggests that "cultures" developed around this basic force in a multi-dimensional sense, working around the *Sramana* ideal of a cluster of social relational values embodied in the Buddhist prescriptions. This led to the flourishing of arts and crafts until an alien counter-force

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[8] The Orientalist discourse created the Brahmin as an affirmative congruence with power while identifying the Paraiyar as having a negative congruence with the same power. However, Thass consistently pointed out and relentlessly challenged the real-life Brahmin resistance to Subaltern emergence in the new spheres of land allotment, education, employment, and political representation (Aloysius, 2010:245-246).

identified as Aryan and Brahminical sectarian power and privilege initiated a long drawn out war of ideals and ideology. Hence, he categorises the *Sramanic* as achievement based, rationalist, and humanist. Thass practiced historical deconstruction as well as reconstruction to arrive at the truth through a moral critique (Aloysius, 2010:247-248).

Thass contested the category Parayar that was floated to create the other binary Brahmin in the Orientalist but also in the nationalist discourse. He argued that the Brahminical way of life is deceptive and despicable, which is alien to both historically genuine and legitimately political life. Hence, he asks that "how could Tamil savants, Siddha practitioners, and advisers to royalties of old, current teachers, engineers, magistrates, *rai bahadurs* and *srestadhars* be contemptuously called as Parayars?" This, he clarifies, must be a contest against "the pretenders and defenders of falsehood." Hence even the category untouchable was read by Thass as only referring to those who were ill, lepers, cholera patients, those who suffer from poisonous poxes, traitors, backstabbers, and murderers. Hence, he countered why the decent and dignified people were considered untouchable? He therefore considers the Brahmins and casteists as untouchable and unapproachable. Hence them practicing untouchability was plainly selfish and opportunistic, he argued (Thass cited in Aloysius, 2010:249-250). In this deconstruction, Thass completely punctures the narrative that produced Parayar as an untouchable, instead he reverses the gaze back on the caste-supremacist narrative of the Brahmin as the centre of socio-political and religio-cultural space in the subcontinent.[9]

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[9] Thass in his *Tamizhan*, for instance, deconstructs the narratives on *panchamas*, untouchables and depressed classes that were circulated in the late nineteenth century public sphere in Madras, through a thorough hermeneutic exploration of the word to reject the construction of the same. About the *panchamas* he asks wittily – "are these the remnants of *pandavas* (*pancha pandavas*) of old, or victims of

Turning it around Thass interestingly asks who could be an *Iyer* and produces the oppositional gaze on the most dominant figure of aspiration as a counter-look. He rhymes the word *Iyer* with the word "higher" class and professes that only those – who can protect all life as their own, attain knowledge, excel in discernment, be generous and moral, transcend caste discrimination and jealousy, and promote human unity – can be called "*Iyer*/higher class." He mandates that only those who become compassionate, inclusive, and selfless through self-discipline, good conduct, and universal compassion; while renouncing particularly the despicable distinctions of caste through long years of practice are higher human beings. Largely, he proposes that "the Buddhist moral qualities of an exalted human life were based on achievement," and not on one's birth (Thass cited in Aloysius, 2010:253).

He ultimately foregrounds that identification is about what one does, and not what one's birth is. In connection, he accuses those who have been bought into the caste-ideals as mere imitators. They are only *paarpaar*, meaning imitator. Thass uses this term, with a tinge of sarcasm, consistently to refer to those self-called Brahmins. He goes on to suggest that Hindus and Hinduism are merely an alternative term for Brahmins and Brahminism, which sacralize the authority of Brahmins and their practice of caste through the act of imitation. Aloysius claims that the term *paarpaar* is "Thass' contribution to the lexicon of modern Tamil social history" (253). Thass counters the

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a famine (*pancham*), or constituted from the five elements (*panchaputham*) or are the indeed thrashed and scattered as cotton (*panchu*) or do they live along the five rivers (*pancha nadhi*)" (Thass quoted in Aloysius, 2010:252). He also terms that the discourse changed from *panchamas* to depressed classes only to dispense the notions of pity, condescension, and welfare engagement for the dominant groups. He claims that this was a form of contempt, which connotes that the so called depressed classes lacked ideological and cultural resources and hence an absence of human dignity. He pin-pointed that in this narration of the oppressed and depressed, it appeared that the dominant Brahmin would be the centre and the subject. Hence, he countered that all the talk on upliftment and welfare was merely opportunistic and added that it was the best method for self-empowerment and employment. This was, he accused, a strategy by the dominant players to prevent the self-initiative of the so called oppressed and maintain them in their present degraded status. As a counter to that, Thass proposed the identity of the true Buddhist to contest the idea of uplift by the other (Aloysius, 2010:252). Thus, he rejected the identifications such as Paraiyar and lower castes as counter-opposites to the self-identifications of the Brahmin and upper caste.

meaning for the word caste – *sathi* by emphasising its verb form and not noun form. In its verb form, he derives the meaning from Tamil that *sathi* means to achieve, to articulate, and to act. Hence, he states that one must be known only by what one achieves, articulates, and the way one acts. Accordingly, Thass states quite clearly and very differently that there is "nothing natural, given, or divine about caste" in this subcontinent (Thass cited in Aloysius, 2010: 254-255).

Thass constructs *Tamizhan* (Tamilian) as a caste-less identification of the Subalterns, where one neither believes nor practices the caste-way-of-life (*sathi aacharam*). Hence, he propounded that "the casteless Tamil is the genuine and original Tamil (*aadhi Tamizhan*) and a caste Tamil is only a *paadhi Tamizhan* (*half Tamil*)." The rest, therefore, is only "*meethi* (*residual*) Tamil" (Thass cited in Aloysius, 2010:255). Hence Thass argued that the Dravidian, which is another name for Tamil according to Thass, is an oppositional socio-political meaning to the Aryan (which is nothing but a justification of caste as birth), that upholds human worth according to one's deeds. Hence Thass' Dravidian is a positive non-caste political principle of egalitarian and inclusive unification, which Aloysius claims, was an ideal that was based on a congruence between power and culture (256).

Thass founded a counter-throw through re-imagining a history of language – Tamil – that rationalizes a caste-less sociality. This counter-throw on history and writing, practiced by Thass, is pedagogic because change is the ultimate desire. He wove together a social as well as religious counter world that defied the ascriptive discrimination of the Brahminical congruence between power and culture. He redefined the identity of the sub-continental history, culture, and tradition. Thass' writings have insisted on a rationalized community while imagining about a language. Numerous pieces of historical and linguistic evidence were mobilized to build up a logically

coherent caste of continuity and identity with the *purva/sakya* Buddhists. This anti-caste community, which was constituted through the lens of out-caste experience, was an open-ended and inclusive identity that was based on caste-lessness and universal compassion as ethical principles.

Writing a world outside caste, the Tamil Dalits forcefully imagined a "coming-community" which is not transitory and liminal, but "looks-back" insistently at the past. The experience of freedom to conceptualize this anti-caste community in Tamil is not dissociated from political practice. For the threshold people, such as the Dalits, "alterity" as a concept to figure out the communitas. The caste of the individual and the presence of caste are deconstructed, but the singularity of the self opens itself to alterity through writing – one may argue using Nancy. And the Tamil Dalits wrote and published in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

Taking a cue out of this significant critique, it is instructive to read Thass' effort to create an anti-caste vernacular cosmopolitan, in the Tamil print public sphere, during the early twentieth century. His writings must be treated as words on a world outside caste. Particularly, his journal carried writings on literary and cultural material, historical and social analysis, and ethico-religious commentaries were hermeneutically rich, interpretatively complex, and ideologically refreshing. The most oppressed by caste used journals to create a language of caste-less world, so as to belong and communicate, through a critical interpretative practice. Hence, the Dalits used the reserves of language to explore print-modernity for an anti-caste exploration. But they were also experimental in their practice of knowledge. This was, however, never recognized by even thoughtful historians of Tamil print-history.

PRINT, READING-WRITING PRACTICES, AND ANTI-CASTE PUBLIC SPHERE

Modern print, as a subject of research enquiry, has kept many historians, philologists, media-theorists, and linguists busy. As often theorized, slowly yet systematically, print paved ways to make language largely sound-less (McLuhan, 1962). Printed truths privileged the eye, more than any other sensory organ. Besides, print inscribed languages, and therefore knowledge, into a visual-bias (Ivins, 1969). Hence, print-capitalism in nineteenth and twentieth centuries could evoke the idea of a nation as "imagined political community," a derivative category, in many countries as languages and nations were simultaneously produced through print-modernity (Anderson, 1991). In Indian languages, particularly, the complex relationship between orality, print-history, and nation has been a subject of scholarly interest for some time now (Blackburn, 2003). Despite serious research on this field, these studies do not have much to say about the marginalized regime of truths. In India, what was print to those who were considered outcaste, whose senses were "untouched" and "unseen"? What does modern print mean to Dalits?

In the context of the post-Mandal agitations and debates, where discussions on caste, Dalit politics and public-sphere were rampant (Ilaiah, 1996, 1998; Guru, 2000; Nigam, 2000; Nanda, 2001), Pandian argued that the lower castes' contradictory engagement with modernity and politics has a message for the present. He strongly propounded that being "One Step Outside Modernity" (Pandian, 2002) alone can guarantee them a public where the politics of difference through caste can articulate itself. Caste can emerge as a legitimate category of democratic politics, he argued, for democracy to take root properly in India. Colonialism, he argued, made the "national community" speak in two competing sets of languages dealing with the issue of caste.

The dominant caste nationalists, he stated, spoke of caste by other means, and the oppressed talked about caste on its "own terms."

He furthered his argument thus – the nationalist resolution against colonialism was not founded "on the divide between spiritual and material" (Chatterjee, 1993, quoted in Pandian, 2002:1736). It rendered the mode of talking caste not on its own terms. There was an intimacy sought between modernity and a desire to keep caste out of the public sphere. He says that if we pluralize "national community" and "national culture," the obvious triumph of dominant nationalism over colonialism would at once emerge as a story of domination over varied sections of the Subaltern social groups within the nation. In other words, if one foregrounds dominant nationalism in an oppositional dialogue with the Subaltern social groups within the nation, instead of colonialism, the divide between the spiritual and material, inner and outer, would tell us stories of domination and exclusion. This would be under the sign of culture and spirituality *within* the so called national community itself. Hence, the Subaltern counter public, he argued, had an "antagonistic indebtedness" to modernity as it emerged in India (Pandian: 1739). That is they had to engage and rely on the same modernity, as the dominant castes, so that caste is contested tooth and nail.

"Language became a zone over which the nation first had to declare its sovereignty and then had to transform in order to make it adequate for the modern world" (Pandian: 1736). However, Pandian had only studied how Sanskrit and English were doing this in the Indian context in the article. The idea of a sovereign nation emerging firstly in the language-zone against colonial powers, with an "antagonistic indebtedness," is an important idea that one should push back, just before the nationalist period in Madras presidency. However, why such an analysis was not done

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in vernacular languages – Tamil for instance – seeks special attention. This especially so for the Dalit counter publics, that produced anti-caste writing. The fact that why and how different kinds of nations as imaginaries competed against each other, in the same language, was never given a serious thought, especially in the context of print-public spheres and the changed reading practices that print created.

Venkatachalpathy's *Province of the Book* (2012), while accounting the history of reading practices in the colonial Tamil public sphere, studies the Tamil book history attending to the ways in which the reading and learning practices changed, as palm scripts were converted into print. A particular mode of reading – silent reading vis-à-vis reading aloud – emerged as a dominant practice. The printed book made silent reading as the dominant mode, which was a historical transition from learning by rote and aloud. Venkatachalapathy, hence, drew attention to the new publics that the printed book was creating, while erasing the older reading-writing practices.

However, historian Rajesh claims, in his detailed study of print history in Tamil, that the social history of the recovery and publication of Tamil classics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was dictated by a conglomeration of upper caste land holding communities. They were active participants along with institutions like the "dominant land holding Saiva mutts and the Tamil language promotion associations under the collusive pact with hegemonic colonial economy" (Rajesh, 2011:65). These attempts, he states, brought the Tamil classical texts as books into the print form by the turn of the nineteenth century itself, in the context of a competitive environment under colonialism. The literary canon, henceforth, was transformed from a manuscript to the

print form by an elite, land-owning, upper caste public sphere whose patronage networks were both the religious (Saivaite) and the colonial institutions.[10]

Recent historical research argues that the popularization of Tamil and publication of classical texts in the language was indeed a culmination of three factors in the late nineteenth century. One of the factors that influences" the institutionalization of Tamil literature, language, and nation in a continuum is the growth of journalism," among other reasons (Rajesh, 2013:17). But research into the Subaltern articulations of Tamil as a heritage of the most oppressed, and not just those concerns of the upper castes – that either contest the Brahmins in the public sphere, or those that critique the colonial state – are very less.

Historians indeed, while foregrounding such an analysis, did not adequately reflect on the role of the emergent journalistic practice that gained currency among the most oppressed, in "province" that "the book" created. Nor is there a serious reflection on the Tamil public spheres and its anti-caste counter publics that journalistic-print brought forth. There is hardly any account of how an embodied Dalit counter-public had to work on alternative epistemological practices using journalistic-print, rather than

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[10] Rajesh lays out three phases of patronage and its networks for the print and publishing industry in Tamil during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The first phase, he states, started in 1812 with the establishment of the college Fort St. George through active patronage from the Madras government. The second phase from 1830s to 1880s consisted of the editorial and printing activities associated with the Saiva revival movement inaugurated by Arumuga Navalar in Jaffna which was ably supported by the Zamindars of Ramanathapuram and Tiruvavatuturai Atinam in Tirunelveli. The Tamil pandits played a dual role as printers and editor/publishers. And the third phase from 1880s to 1920s was dominated by C.W. Damodaran Pillai, U.V. Swaminatha Aiyer and others who published the Sangam epics such as *Silappadhikaram*, *Sivakasinthamani*, and *Manimekalai* in the 1880s for the first time. The third phase produced enormous numbers of Tamil classical texts as books by scholars who were all invariably Brahmins such as U.V. Swaminatha Aiyer, Rajagopala Aiyangar, Pinattur Narayanasamy Aiyar, and Sowriperumal Aranyan. An intensive competition continued between Damodaran Pillai from the Saiva Mutt and Swaminatha Iyer to produce the maximum number of books from the antique Tamil past. Aiyar indeed also maintained his link with very rich patronage networks, so much so, Rajesh clearly states that a conglomeration of upper caste land holding communities such as *Smartha* Brahmins, Chettiars, Mudaliars, Vellala Pillais, and Maravars in alliance with dominant Saiva mutts and colonial officers actively participate in the transformation of the Tamil classics from the manuscript to its publication in printed book form (Rajesh, 2011:64-91).

the book as a dominant print form which the caste-public practiced profusely.[11] And very few works highlight Thass' industrious work as an organic intellectual as his contribution to Tamil journalistic print and creative knowledge practice that prioritizes an anti-caste point of view (Ravikumar, 2007).

The first Tamil periodical was published by the Christian Religious Tract Society in 1831 – *The Tamil Magazine*. The increasing demand of the literate public caused many journals and periodicals to be published, and these in turn provided a platform for authors to publish their work. *Rajavritti Bodhini* and *Dina Varthamani* in 1855 and Salem Pagadala Narasimhalu Naidu's fortnightlies, Salem *Desabhimini* in 1878 and Coimbatore *Kalanidhi* in 1880, were the earliest Tamil journals that are recorded in Tamil journal history. The first regular newspaper in Tamil was *Swadesamitran* in 1882, started by G. Subramaniya Iyer, editor and sponsor of *The Hindu* and a founding member of the Indian National Congress. When Subramania Aiyer quit *The Hindu* in 1898, he made the *Swadesamitran* his full-time business. *Swadesamitran* emerged as one of the earliest "nationalist" dailies of the Tamil public sphere.

Even before the print-flourish gained momentum towards a print capitalism of the nationalist kind, the Tamil Dalits used print-journals to create an anti-caste community imaginary. They often contested and debated the nationalist aspirations of the dominant castes. This early period is least researched or documented. Many Dalit-Subaltern intellectuals attempted to ingeniously create a reading community, by using the emergent print reading-writing practice. For instance, names such as – C. Iyothee

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[11] In recent years attempts have been made to investigate the articulations of oppressed communities in the sphere of printing and publishing in colonial Tamil Nadu. Works such as Rajangam's *Theendapadatha Noolgal* (*Untouchable Books*, 2008) and Balasubramaniam's *Suryodhayam Mudhal Udhayasooryan Varai* (*From Suryodhayam to Udhayasooryan*, 2017) are an excellent account of Dalits engagement with Tamil print in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

Thass, A.P. Periyasamy Pulavar, T.C. Narayanaswamy Pillai, T.I. Swamykannu Pulavar, Pandit Munusamy, Rettamalai Srinivasan, John Rathinam, Muthuvira Pavalar, K. Swappeneswary Ammal, among others, were pioneers in such a participation in journalistic print (Velmangai and Kumarasami, 2013:2). This helped in carving out not only a political but also an anti-caste cultural community that reads and writes in public.

Some of the journals that were run by these figures during the latter half of the nineteenth century were – *Suriyodhayam* (1869), *Panchama* (1871), *Sugirdavasini* (1879), *Dravida Pandian* (later *Dravidian*, 1885), *Dravida Mithran* (1885), *Anror Mitran* (1886), *Mahavikatathoothan* (1888), *Paraiyan* (1893), *Illara Ozhukkam* (1898), *Buloga Vasagan* (1900), *Dravida Kokilam* (1907), *Oru Paisa Tamizhan* (later *Tamizhan*, 1907). The idea of "Dravidian"[12] as a political imaginary, where anti-caste consciousness was first constituted, was also mooted by the Dalit-Subalterns first in the journalistic public sphere.

Gowthaman supplements that texts about medicines, Astrology, Maths, Astronomy, and grammar which had a genealogical link with caste-less Dravidian languages and Buddhism were found as a textual heritage that was possessed by the Dalits of North Tamil Nadu. Hence texts such as Markalinga Pandaram's *Kumara Samiyam*, *Manikanda Keralam*, *Sodhida Alangaram*, *Varu Shadhi Nool*, and *Kanidha Nool* were published and circulated during the early nineteenth century. F.W. Ellis's assistant and Tamil Sangam's manager Muthusamy Pillai, a Dalit from North Madras, published Nayanar's *Thirikural*, *Naaladi Nanooru*, and *Aranerith Theebam* through the help of the college at Fort St. George in Madras in the early nineteenth century.

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[12] The magazine *Dravida Pandian* started by Rev. John Rathinam and Thass in the year 1885 was the first magazine to use the term *Dravidian*.

Besides, Mayilai Kuzhandhaivelu Pandaram published the *Siddhar Padalgal* and Pudhupettai Thiruvengada Sami Pandithar published *Vaidhya Kaaviyam*, *Sivavaakiyam*, and *Rathina Kaandam*. V. Ayothee Thassa Kaviraja Pandithar, who was apparently the teacher of Thass, published *Pogar Ezhunooru*, *Agasthiyar Erunooru*, *Simuttu Rathinach Surookam*, and *Paalavagadam*. This production of texts by Dalits not only produced a textual tradition in print that contested the vedic Brahminic lineage of Tamil texts – both Vaishnavaite and Saivaite, but it also created a public sphere that was textually embodied and lay claim over a caste-less civilization in print (Gowthaman, 2004:116-138).

Reading, hence, as an embedded activity was going through a tremendous modification. Print-cultures introduced a mediatory effect particularly through journals. Along with book-reading communities, print enunciated "political imaginaries" of different kinds (Anderson, 1991). The Dalit-Subalterns were active agents in such a transition, so that, they were participants of an emergent "sensorium," that was being modulated not only as emancipatory – beyond being just considered untouched – but also lay claim over a civilization that is much open.

Aloysius points out and confirms that the reasons for the emergence of Buddhist movement in the northern Tamil Nadu in the second half of the nineteenth century were many. But primarily, he states, it was "the relative low-level Brahmin impact on colonialism," which created a multifaceted awakening among "the colonially subalternized castes in South India" (Aloysius, 2010:238). He also claims that those who were called *Adi-Dravida*rs and Parayars wielded some access to Tamil literature, medicine, and very many sacral traditions based on several forms of asceticism. He also suggests that the institutional modernity produced by colonialism provided a content for

members of this community to resuscitate themselves both individually and collectively. One of the manifestations of this, he claims, is that "they took to the printed word" as a means of socio-political and religio-cultural awakening as well as mobilization (Aloysius, 2010:238-274).

Therefore, emergence of print journals, in the Tamil public sphere, could be understood as embarking debates and discussions on – authority, interpretation, different versions of the palm-scripts that were converted into print texts, literary historiography, religious and community claims over literary texts, referencing, and literary criticism in a heterogeneously politicized Tamil public sphere. The journalistic practice, apparently, crafted community as a political force that could emerge through print journalism, especially, for the Dalit-Subaltern constituencies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But importantly it was also fashioning new subjects who could sense – read, touch, smell, and cultivate tastes – a research area that is largely omitted and under studied.

The Dalit community, in this context, arguably experiences its own communication as a political signification. This thrust on being-political exposes the community as being-in-common. It could be also understood that writing and communication constitute the "political" moment of the self-definition of the community. It opens the community to itself, and to its limits. It enjoins its own dissemination, as Nancy argues, through its own writing by opening out to itself, and its own alterity forming a "unique convergence" (Nancy: xxxvi). Hence, community is brought into a free play for a political purpose. Writing is political and it gives the community a specific existence – of being-in-common – which gives rise to the existence of being-self. This mode of exposition is also posed towards an alterity – an

appeal to the other. Therefore, the Dalits cannot think of an anti-caste community as essence. In fact, they must counter it. In the words of Nancy "community is a matter of existence, not of essence, being-in-common without being absorbed into a common substance" (xxxvii).

Thus, the Tamil Dalits used print-journals to create an anti-caste community imaginary, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They not only rejected the nationalism propounded by the predominantly upper caste print-public sphere, but also laid out an alternative knowledge practice. This prioritized the oral traditions present among the oppressed communities. In Thass, the journalistic-print was used intellectually to retrieve, contest, re-read, and revaluate an anti-caste legacy. In short, his search for an anti-caste descent fundamentally transforms what was previously considered immobile and static. Not recognizing his efforts is to ironically embrace the colonial discourse and high-caste apologetics aimed at erasure of more than a century of Dalits' attempts to make their own life visible and legible. Increasingly, thus, Dalits profusely use social-media and internet as alternative technological tools in their fight against caste today. This is against media-giants who structure the globalized regime of power that do not voice the violence of caste loudly.

ANTI-CASTE COMMUNITAS?

One can argue that the Subaltern thought in India that belongs to the anti-caste tradition, uses interpretation as a tool to reconfigure notions of space and time that is open, creative, and resistant. They inaugurate and constitute a millennial anti-caste communitas, of a kind, as creative opposition and history against caste immunitas. This has relevance, as resistance, for the rampant violence and humiliation that oppressively institutionalize the body and mind today in India.

As categories such as caste and religion are widely used to conceptualize identities as political imaginaries in South Asia, this comparative study finds them limiting, when it is applied to anti-caste intellectual genealogy. Hence, as discussed in the second chapter, the category "Communitas" is immensely useful. It is inspired from anti/post-Nazi and Stalinist thought, tracing particularly Nancy, Blanchot, and Esposito. Nancy develops the thought of being as compearance – co-appear as the most notable condition for the possibility of the political. Could Thass' attempts to create a community through writing be read as "finite being presenting 'together,' and severally" (Nancy, 1991). Would Thass' writing claim that communication is at the origin of the community as an originary sociality – against caste that excommunicates people. Does an anti-caste foreground an exposure to an outside, in the sharing with the others all the limits, the borders of finite beings? Is Tamil Buddhism a community disposed to sharing, not closing or enclosure? Is it a community conscious of its constitutive, communicative experience? Would caste be considered the most anti-social, anti-communicative, and anti-communal invention as it sanctions non-fusion as a law?

Dalit intellectuals seem to conceptualize community as beyond the traditional model of the social bond – caste. They interrogate community to undo caste and Brahminism as such. They open the chance of a political to emerge that is otherwise foreclosed. They question, through an ethical-ontological register, the philosophical suppositions of a caste-society through a deconstructive understanding of community. Consequently, this opens – a deconstructive opening – in an essential way of a possibility for a caste-less community. The discussions on community in the second chapter – as one of ethics and ontology – implore the question of community as fundamentally philosophical. The attempt to engage with the other, so as, to conceive

the community as related with the other, has been Nancy's and Blanchot's attempt to theorize the community.

Esposito's communitas as *munus, communis*, and *itas* which variably means gift, debt, and obligation could relate to the Tamil Dalit's establishing *sangams* and *sabhas*. Their engagement with Buddhism was about belonging to a community against caste in the vernacular both in the global and local context. In the colonial and nationalist context, it must have enabled them to belong to a world-community and at the same time with their own communities. It inscribes a negation and exscribes an affirmation whereby it becomes both a traditional and an elective community at once. A "communitas" as a "totality of persons united not by a property but precisely by an obligation or a debt; not by an addition but a subtraction" (Esposito, 2009:6). This caste-less community is an exposure and it is characterized by the other, by a voiding to alter oneself. The community appeals as it withdraws from caste and Brahminism, by differentiating itself from immunitas.

These theoretical gestures (that were also discussed in the second chapter) are intrinsically linked. This could be expanded and extended to understand how the oppressed, importantly the Dalits, in particular contexts view and constitute community – textually – and question the philosophical supposition of the political in caste-*immunitas*. Thass' texts are examples that undo the presupposition of the social bond, which is constituted through caste-subjection and immunization, to reconstruct community through an ethico-ontological communitas with anti-caste values. Experience, as an instituting category, frames this conceptual terrain to understand community.

If caste is treated as civilizational violence as it annihilates the corporal being – the very presence – of Dalits, who are eliminated and made absent from social and culturally active relations. Moreover, the simultaneous "absent-presence," as discussed in the second chapter, provides the full definitional conditions for civilizational violence (Guru and Sarukkai, 2012). Dalits, at this zenith of civilizational violence, remain "untouchable, uncrossable, unseeable, unhearable, unapproachable, and uncommunicable" as they are pushed outside time and space, to embody a "shock-absorber existence" (Guru and Sarukkai: 83-88). However, the most oppressed, as we would see in Thass' writings, have resisted this violence treating this as a genealogy of loss, and provide a resistant sociality through civilizational memory. They also work through history as pedagogy, making time and space open and resistant, as well as, where one could practice an emancipatory communitas.

INDHIRAR DHESA SARITHIRAM

Thass reconstructs Tamil Buddhism through a counter-cultural enquiry into religion, history, community, and identity, primarily, against the institutional codes of Brahminism. His attempt at a hermeneutic historiography, subverts, and creates a space outside, or against caste as history. Thass uses the reserves of Tamil language as an archive of history, in the context of an emergent Tamil print public sphere in Madras Presidency, in the early twentieth century. Defying formal institutionalization of historical time and space, he attempts an interpretative history and community as practice.

Indhirar Dhesa Sarithiram (*History of the Indhirar Country*), his serial accounts in 65 parts published between August 1910 and November 1911, in the journal *Tamizhan,* is an attempt to reconstruct a Buddhist history of India (published as a book

in 1912, and 2nd edition in 1957, and later in 1999 by the Dalit Sahitya Academy). It is a reconstructive social history that politically and culturally counters the established "story of caste." It is imperative to study Thass as someone who de-institutes as well as constitutes a *Sarithiram* in Tamil. While it bemoans a genealogy of loss due to civilizational violence, it embarks into civilizational memory as a pre-history of caste, so as to inaugurate an anti-caste millennial communitas.[13]

Thass builds on oral folk narratives that emphasize not only an enmity in practice against discourses that bring the Brahmin to the centre stage, but also claims spatial and temporal precedence against anything Brahminical and Hindu. He starts the text with the question – why was there a saying that claims that the Parayar is precedent to the Brahmin. *Paarapaanukku moopan paraiyan kaelpaarillamar keelsaathi aanan* – "The Parayar is elder to the Brahmin, as none listened to him he became low caste" (*T,* Vol 1: 26). This question pushes him to consider the history of a civilizational opposition and enmity between the original Buddhists – who were degraded as Parayars – and the deceptive Brahmins.

This starts with the publications on *Thirukural* and Thiruvalluvar. When the Perumal brothers – Visaka Perumal Aiyar and Saravana Perumal Aiyar – published the *Thirukural* in the 1835, they inform in the preface that Valluvar was born of mixed birth (of a Brahmin father and a Parayar mother). This indeed created a caste biography to incredible geniuses, which countered the claims that these figures indeed caste-less, practicing the Jain and/or Buddhist religion. The native press that existed during the mid-nineteenth century, particularly of the dominant castes, converted the classical

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[13] Thass' *Sarithiram* has a unique tale to tell. His narrative of India is originally a Buddhist nation. The very first part of the *Sarithiram* functions as a political template of Buddhist historical materialism, so to speak, which prefigures his examination in later parts of the series, of the emergence of *mlechhar* (Aryans), 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 Smriti and its dehumanization of Indian society to the present.

literary texts from manuscript to print.[14] However, they also created caste biography as history through these texts, which Thass rejects and responds critically.

Thass treats history, or much simply researching the past, as an ethico-ontological pedagogy. Thass, in his *preface,* states that the intent to publish *IDS* was "to explain and to remove problems" (*vilakudhal... allalai neekudhal*) the stories that were preached as history. He counter-reads stories that were being established as history to reconstruct a counter. He requests "to research history and reject everything else" (*sarithira aaraichi ininri sagala vatraiyum usaava vendugiren*).[15] *Villakudhal* the Tamil word in fact stands for both interpretation and explanation. In fact, it is instructive to read this practice of research, in the light of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology, where understanding and explanation are treated as an ontological aspect of interpretation. It seeks to "bring into language an experience, a way of living in and of being-in-the-world."[16]

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[14] In an extensively documented historical research on the long nineteenth century Tamil print public sphere, Rajesh's *Reproduction and Reception of Classical Tamil Literature* (2013) argues that the social history of "the recovery and publication of Tamil classics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" was dictated by a conglomeration of upper caste landlord holders such as *Smartha* Brahmins, Chettiars, Mudaliars, Pillais, and Maravars in the Tamil country. They were active participants along with institutions like the dominant land holding Saiva mutts and the Tamil language promotion associations such as the Madurai Tamil *sangam* and Chennai *Kalvi sangam* under the hegemonic colonial economy.

[15] *Sarithirangalai aaraichi seiya vendumaeandri karpanaa kadhaigalai alla…sarithira aaraichiyininri sagalavatraiyum usaava vendugiren* [Research just history, not fantasy stories … and research nothing but history] (*T*, Vol. I: 573).

[16] Ricoeur, through his seminal works, argues that the attempt to structure time through the use of language, in history as well as in fiction, fulfils a narrative function that ultimately leads back to the question of self. The interrelation of understanding and explanation is, thus, described as an ability to reconstruct the internal dynamic of the text, and to restore to its ability to project itself outside itself in the representation of a world that one could inhabit. Hence interpretation, for Ricoeur, is a dialectic of understanding and explanation at the level of sense immanent to the text. Discourse, thereby, never exists for its own sake, for its own glory. He states that in all its uses it seeks to bring into language an experience, a way of living in and of being-in-the-world which precedes it and which demands to be said (Ricoeur, 1983:154).

For instance, the title calls for an interesting reading. *Indhirar* in *Indhirar Dhesa Sarithiram* is the Buddha for Thass. *Indhiram*,[17] for him, comes from the word *ainthiram* or *aimpori* (*ainthu + thiram* – five + senses) – the five senses – of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. And the one who controlled and conquered the five senses for practicing *aram* – ethical action or conduct is *Ainthirar* also *Indhirar*. Siddhartha, the king of Magadha country who became the Buddha, and preached this method to his followers, was called by that name. *Sangha*s were established in his name to propagate this thought-practice of learning through five senses and these *Sangha*s were called *Indhira Viharangal* – the *Vihars*. The land that teaches, practices, and remembers the *Indhirar* through *Indhira Vizha* was called *Indhiyam*, *Indhiram,* and *Indhiya* where *Indhira Vihars* were constructed. People, who lived there and followed the path of *Indhirar,* were called *Indhiyargal* – Indians. The word *Indhiyam* is interpreted to generate a variety of new meanings to constitute a resistant concept for understanding nation as space and time. And the land particularly was linked to the idea of practice that trains the five senses (Pandithar, 2010:5).[18]

This mode of thinking questions the idea of community as a given identity and problematizes its limits. An originary sociality that is ethico-ontological in principle seem to contest the simple theme of the human as an essential being or the nation as a constructed space in time. Community is underlined as an act – one singular being with another singular being. Finitude exposes itself as a gift and exists as communication in this relationship. *Indhirar Dhesam* and *Aindhirar* co-appears or "compears" together as space and time – of "Being Singular Plural" (Nancy, 2000).

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[17] Thass starts his book with the sentence – *indhiram ennum mozhi ainthiram ennum mozhiyin thiribam* ["the word *indhiram* is a reconstructed from the word *ainthiram*"] (Pandithar, 2010:15), but mozhi also means language, in Tamil, and *Thiripu* may mean, to insert and derive.

[18] See, Iyothee Thassa Pandithar, *Indhirar Dhesa Sarithiram* (Chennai: Tamil Kudiarasu Publication, 2010).

Thass interprets and explains the verses that were quoted and interpreted from *Arungalai Seppu, Manimekalai, Tolkappiyam, Veeracoliyam, Silapadhikaram, Valayapathi, Kundalakesi, Sivaka Sinthamani* and *Soolamani* – fourth century AD Tamil texts – through speculative etymology. These were palm-scripts that he personally possessed, and he uses them to derive meaning and describe his idea of India. The formations of the languages signaled a significant shift from the oral to the written word, Thass claims. The three languages Pali, Sanskrit, and Tamil were structured only to spread the Buddhist values far and wide. Through etymological connections, Thass' writings rivet the reader to read India's past as originally Buddhist.[19]

This is done by a substantive exploration and perception by arguing that that there was a robust presence of Buddhism amongst Indians in the subcontinent. He highlights, in *Tamizhan*, the inter-regional exchanges, inter-linguistic marriages, humanistic learning, non-hierarchical material practices and divisions of labour that were present as a Buddhist past in India. Thus, he refers to an Aryan invasion, using particularly the Tamil literary sources, but also the racial categories that were in circulation among the Orientalists, colonial Anthropologists and administrators. Not only the usage of Aryan is used to indict caste practices among the Brahmins, but it was also to highlight the exclusionary living by the invaders that weighed heavily against communities such as the Parayars. It was not to foist a water tight view of racial types of Indian and foreigner.

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[19] Language, for Thass, becomes the tool through which the thoughts of Buddha were recorded, preserved, and spread. For this purpose, Pali was used as an oral form, and they were transcribed in Sanskrit and Tamil. These languages – one from the Aryan and the other from the Dravidian family of languages – were not fundamentally opposed to each other, for Thass. *Panchsheel* was transcribed into Tamil and Sanskrit. Figures such as Janagar, Vaamadevar, Nandhi, Romar, Kabilar, and Panini were trained in Sanskrit, whereas, Agastyar was trained in Tamil. They spread the thoughts of the Buddha in all the four directions. Language was a tool to access different regions and a community of practice. According to Thass, Janagar went to the North, Agastyar to the South, Thirumoolar to the West, Satta Munivar to the East (Pandithar, 2010:6-7).

Thass, thus, mobilized references in *sarithiram* to rhetorically argue that the caste-Brahmins did not possess anything of their own, and they masqueraded under Buddhist categories only to exploit fellow human beings. By reinterpreting this-worldly Buddhist understanding of the human body, human suffering, and humanity, Thass opens-up the need to understand etymological shifts within a language. He reinterprets those very mundane words that were rarefied, and used for religious and caste purposes. Thass, therefore, constructs *mleccha* and *vesha* as figures and tropes that symbolized and created caste discrimination and differentiation in this country. He links the history of the invading Aryans, calling them as deceptive Brahmins, who annihilated true meaning of words, and he accuses them of vanquishing the Buddhists to establish the caste-system by fixing and freezing the endogamic professions and life in the subcontinent.

Even the divine Hindu text *Manu Dharma Shastra*, he argues, was fabricated by the *vesha Brahmanas* to humiliate and lower the *poorva* Buddhists of this country (*T,* Vol. 1: 593-94). *Vesha* as a trope – deception or falsity – is mobilized against what is considered as *poorva* – original, or indigenous, or wholesome. In this attempt, *vesha* is equated with deceit, self-centrism, falsehood, opportunism, untruth and importantly unethical conduct. Being unethical was equated to *vesha* Brahminism. Thass uses the resources from *Siddha* literature, treating it as part of Buddhist ethics, and floats it against Brahminism. A textual communitas against a textual immunitas was set-up through a creative interpretation of words in *IDS*.

IDS, therefore, cannot be classified as an attempt by those who were called as outcastes to invent/invoke a glorified, kingly past. He reconstructs that the simple people (*Ezhiya Makkal*) lived according to ethics and morals as devised and propagated by Buddhist thought in this country. They used the resources in Tamil to textually re-

produce the community of action. In this venture, Thass invariably uses hermeneutics as a method to suggest that caste-less socius or community has a longer standing truth as communicative practice, whereas caste as socius is a recent discovery – a false hood that is based on social immunization, sanitization and ex-communication. In a sense, he suggests that anti-caste life has a pre-history in a casteless community as it precedes caste as life-world. Caste-lessness, in that sense, is an originary sociality.

However, *IDS* to recover history, not only engages with, but also uses the research and publications that were produced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – works that were produced in the field of European languages, comparative ethnic studies, representative politics, individualism as a philosophy, rational thought, anthropological and archaeological studies, realism, naturalism, romanticism, atheism, Buddhist recovery, protestant Christianity, and scientific discoveries. These global thought-movements influenced and chartered the path of this creative discourse on history, that de-brahminises time and space.

The hermeneutics in *IDS* tries to de-casteize the so-called Hindu story of the untouchable and reverses the gaze on the falsity of caste. The non-exclusionary and caste-free meanings of words set the tone to rethink the identity and history of the marginalized. This embedded hermeneutics, therefore, seeks to achieve multiple possibilities. One of the political claims it makes is that the Hindu texts were created by casteising the Buddhist ones. Not only does he read "the history" of the marginalized by the caste system as having links with the pre-caste social formations in the subcontinent, but he also argues that they possess and claim a caste-free Buddhist civilizational past. This is done by an etiological reading of history from within the sources available to the marginalized communities to recover the suppressed Buddhist past behind them.

IDS interprets that the subcontinent as a space, and Buddhism as time (*samayam*), are part of a civilizational memory of the most oppressed who were rejected as untouchables. Thass, in his account, clearly differentiates between Hinduism and Buddhism. He claims that the history of the Indian country is nothing but a fight between the two. As an ontological way of living, *IDS* clearly dismisses Brahminism and the Hindu monks. He accuses them as living a life of falsehood, deception, stealth, and undisciplined life. An ethics-based life which is *edhartham* – the natural and the real – was never to be found in *vesham* – falsity and deception, he argues. In fact, he accuses that Brahminism had appropriated the *edhartham* from Buddhism and converted it into *vesham.*

One of the important characteristics, he claims, is the increase of free-loaders acting as Brahmins for a self-centred caste life. He accuses them as only being trained in begging. He also states that there was a take-over of the Buddhist *sangha*s through cunning deception by the *vesha* Brahmins. The Buddhist days of respect and remembrance such as *amavasai*, *pournami*, and *attami* – full moon and new moon days – were appropriated, he accuses, as Hindu festive holidays to collect money from commoners. Eighteen varieties of festivals and *yagams* were appropriated from Buddhism. Moreover, a dialectical change in the conception of space happened in this deceptive appropriation, he claims. The *kovil* – the place of the king (here Siddhartha, who became the Buddha) were places of knowledge production, particularly of the Buddhists. These spaces, he suggests, primarily functioned as places that transform people. Law texts, maths texts, philosophical texts, medical texts, grammar and literary texts were composed as *nool* – the thread that binds texts together – in these spaces. Space has a textual meaning attached to it within the Buddhist spatial dynamics. However, once *vesha Brahmanas* took over these spaces as Hindu spaces of worship,

they became *madhak kadaigal* – religious shops, he complains. The meaning that was attached to space and time was appropriated and lost which amounted to civilizational violence.

The sources to float such arguments were various, and they came from different genres as various as compendiums *Nigandukal* and epics – *Irattaik Kaapiyangal*, *Sivaga Sinthamani*, *Soolamani*. Didactic literature in verses – *Thirukkural* and Grammatic texts – *Nannul*, *Veerasozhiyam*. Songs from *Naladiyar*, *Kaakkai Padiniyam*, *Kaivalyam*, *Gnanabotham*, *Patinathar*, *Idaikaatusitthar*, *Sivavakkiyar*, *Pambattisithar*, *Thayumanavar* and *Agapey Sithar*. *Thirumandhiram*, *Arungalaseppu*, *Sithandha Kothu*, *Sivayoga Saaram*, *Muudhurai*, *Avvaiyar*, *Needhi Noolgal*, *Kabiralagaval*, *Nalappillai Baratham*, and *Gnanabodham* – these were texts that were lost and they disappeared from public access. And *Tiripikidam* in Pali and Ashvagosha's *Naardhiya Purana Sangath Thellivu*. Besides claiming that these texts were Buddhist in content and form, he claims that it was the *poorva* Buddhists who wrote – *Aathi Choodi*, *Kondrai Vendhan*, *Moodhurai*, *Kural*, *Needhivenpa*, and *Vivega Sindhamani* – texts that invariably reflected on art, which Thass claims, the Dalits possessed (*T*, Vol. 1:47).

To create the history of *Indhirar*, Thass also uses the figure Ashvaghosha, the Buddhist monk, as a quintessential narrator of *IDS*. He uses the words of Ashvaghosha to tell the story of King Nandan, the Buddhist king, who is treated as an untouchable saint amongst Alwars, the Vaishnavaite saints, in Hindu mythology. Ashvaghosha and Nandan are closely linked in *Indhirar* history according to Thass. The story and death of Nandan is described to mobilize resources to claim that *vesha Brahmanas* were deceptive in their acts against the *poorva* Buddhists of this country. He accuses that the

Buddhist cosmology was totally appropriated by the *vesha Brahmanas* including the noble eight-path toward enlightenment.

In his dialectic, Thass argues that Brahminical appropriation literally increased the number of beggars and religious-shops in the subcontinent. They acted and faked themselves as Brahmins, the small kingdoms were besieged, and the Buddhist *sangha*s were taken over by them through deceit. The symbols and significations of being a Buddhist were also taken over as an external attire to deceive people. Buddha was converted as Sankarar and Shiva for the use of vedic Hinduism. Thass' interpretation has its importance in countering the vedic revivalism of language, literature, and nation in the early twentieth century, to set up an anti-Brahminical (*Sramanic*) cosmology against vedic ritualism and discourse. Thass, as a medicant himself, thus comfortably entered the Siddha tradition as well to claim such a hermeneutical history.

This practice of history is a creative exercise – one of hermeneutic extrapolation. That is through a speculative yet referential etymology. He transfers meaning from one word to another, using available sources, as a deconstructive act, for an alternative construction of community. He neglects and discounts all other available explanations of the word, to derive a new one. This mode of hermeneutics is like what Ricouer has suggested. On reflecting more on interpretation, Ricoeur argues that reading takes place within a community which displays presuppositions and exigencies. And it is in language that the cosmos, desire, and the imaginary reach expression. Hence this practice of hermeneutics is also an attempt for self-understanding by means

of understanding others. Ricoeur categorises interpretation as an existence and an operation of thought, adding that existence then is interpreted existence.[20]

SARITHIRAM AS INTERPRETATIVE PEDAGOGY: CRITICAL/CREATIVE COMMUNITAS

> *Sasthirathirkotra anubavamum, anubavathirkotra sasthirangalum*
>
> *avargalidam kidaiyavam.*
>
> They do not have that knowledge which suits their experience, and that experience which suits their knowledge (Pandithar, 2010:148).

I argue that Thass treats history (*sarithiram*) as pedagogy to lay a claim over civilizational memory against Brahminism and casteism in the early twentieth century. He creates a hermeneutic of caste-less-ness to explore the reserves of Tamil by particularly using the language for a counter-interpretation. While the caste experience is critically described as civilizational violence from outside – by the figure of the *mlechha* in their deceptive role as *vesha Brahmana* – Thass also creates a creative hermeneutic as thought against caste. He claims a civilizational memory through *poorva* Buddhism from within the Tamil language. A spatial and temporal exploration of the Buddhist pedagogy as history is expressed in *IDS*.

Thass' history research, through the dispersal of meaning in Tamil language, is an act of delimitation as well as limitation. For instance, he explains why India is called *baratha gandam* – the Bharath continent. He states that – *Indhiram ennum mozhi*

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[20] Ricoeur brings the hermeneutic problem onto the phenomenological method. His theory of hermeneutics is inspired by an ontology of understanding and an epistemology of interpretation that treats language as symbol- a structure of signification which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates; and in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary and figurative which can be apprehended only through the first. Hence interpretation, he claims, unfolds the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning (Ricoeur, 2005:12-17).

eindhiram enum mozhiyin thiribaam – "India, the word, is a derivation of the word *Aindhiram* that means five senses" (Pandithar, 2010:5).[21] This interpretation treats the Indian nation geographically as an action principle where the way of the Buddha is practiced. Accordingly, the Buddha – the *Aindhirar* was also called *Varadhar,* which is a derivative of the word *barathar,* as he preached *ara* "*varam*" – a gift-giver of ethical treatise to his followers. The land was called North and South Bharath, where *varadhar's* ethical treatise was preached across lands that spoke, at least, twenty languages – which includes Chinese, Sinhala to Konkani and Tulu, along with Sanskrit, Pali and Dravida (Tamil), among others. There are two aspects in this historical reconstruction. The first is reading resistantly a given story (deconstruction), and the other is to constitute an alternative cosmology (reconstruction). Names were particularly used to reinterpret a geography of place as practice, to fundamentally counter the meaning attached to locate the caste of a space in India.

In the subverted story of India, Thass knits a web of referential textuality to reconstruct a narrative through delimitation. Firstly, he rejects that India is caste-Hindu in content. While, one may understand that his exercise is neither an anthropological nor a sociological enquiry; it is but a textual communication. By reconstructing Buddhism, he constitutes a textual imaginary. Thass' practice of history subverts, significantly, the idea of institutional history. He de-institutes the definition of space and time as a quantifiable reference to construct a nation. He constitutes his *Indhirar Dhesam* through locating thought-practice as history. Thass locates as well as dislocates his *Indhiyam,* spatio-temporally, by limiting and delimiting the idea of nation and history.

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[21] See, Iyothee Thassa Pandithar, *Indhirar Dhesa Sarithiram* (Chennai: Tamil Kudiarasu Publication, 2010).

Limiting, because, he works to produce his alternative "history research" in Tamil, though accessing at least four different languages and resources – Tamil, Sanskrit, Pali and English. He develops a referential, descriptive, prose-register, which shares space with poetry, compendiums and epic-narratives that are transcribed into journalistic print space. He creates a space for knowledge practice, through en-textualization, so that it is published and spread across, as Tamil prose, within a limited boundary.

The limitation is, also, fashioned by the attempt to create an alternative history, through reading and referring sources that are in contention with the "authorized" versions of history and historical practice. It competes with other powerful hermeneutics of caste – that of colonial census, and missionaries namely – Christian, Hindu Vaishnavaite, and Vellala Saivaite cosmologies. Thass' methodology, then, is also an attempt to democratize power and practice it, in his own way, to hegemonize an alterity. In his attempt to reconstruct the history of Buddhism through Tamil-print, Thass works with concepts and myths in the language to reconstruct meaning by liberating it from a limited history. Thass, while working within a limitation, delimits temporality and spatiality, and plays with these concepts by rendering them into an anti-caste communitas.

For instance, while researching the history of the *Indhirar Dhesam*, Thass delimits the spatial definition of the idea of nation, and goes beyond to construct it as a community identified by practice. In this, his attempt was not to recreate the history through a linguistic, neither vedic, nor a temporal description of India. Taking for granted, the Buddhist location of his resources, caste-lessness, he argues, is Buddhist, hence, it pre-dates and is against Brahminism. He considers the idea of India as against something, describing it – pre-empting Ambedkar – as a historical conflict between

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Brahminism and Buddhism. Hence his delimiting as well as limiting practice of history is an ingenious attempt to describe who Indians are. For Iyothee Thass, it is anyone who is outside and against caste-immunitas.

Besides, Thass understands that the land itself was fundamentally divided into five spaces (*ainthinaigal*), namely eco-zones such as – sea (*neidhal*), plains (*marudham*), forests (*mullai*), mountains (*kurinji*), and desert (*palai*). Thass defends the work-related identities as spatially related to each eco-zone, thereby, he argues that knowledge (*putthi* that is techné) is experientially produced through work related to each zone. For instance, he suggests that the name *shudras* derive from the term *soosthiram* – the technical know-how. The shudras, he claims, possess the knowledge about water-sharing and working on the land. This work-able knowledge contributes to the linkage of the five landscapes. They were people who worked in the ground and served the people with water, food, and linked the eco-zones. People are produced by their ability to link eco-zones with each other. Eco-zones sustained specific economy, and thus work-names such as those that are present in the *varna* were identified within eco-zones across languages in Pali, Sanskrit, and Tamil. *Indhirar Dhesam*, Thass interpreted, was a Buddhist casteless space comprised of five eco-zones that cut-across many language-speaking zones (9).

Thass states that "naming" becomes a very important act in these spaces, as they reflect an appropriateness and relationship to their eco-zone, work, action, character and life. Naming hence was a casteless act, as they carried a validity. They were not disposed of as a sign and symbol of humiliation. Different people achieved their names through creating their identity by their action. For instance, he suggests that the terms for farmer – *usavar*, *uzhavazhar*, and *vellalar* – were given as work identities to people symbolizing the job they do rather than as people who are born into these identities.

Work and eco-zones added meaning to the names (Pandithar: 13). Hence a critical re-interpretation of space that is particularly identified by practice played a major role in the act of naming.

While the notions of love and kindness seem to prescribe the notions of space and action, conciliation (*sama*), gift (*dhaana*), rupture (*bedha*), and force (*thandam*) seem to have been the governing diplomacy of the *Indhirar* space (Pandithar: 13). A Buddhist demography seems to be a creative re-interpretation of the idea of space itself in such an exploration. Though an eclectic unilateral story of a Buddhist unitary space seems to emerge by linking persona such as the Buddha to the rulers of the country namely – Vimbasarsan, Udhaiyanan, Kalakoodan, Asokan, Chandraguptan, Nandan and so on, Thass, however, argues that personalities such as Asoka and Nandan create a dialectical notion of space as *dhesam* where people live an ethical life (13-14).

Even the meaning of the name Asoka, the Buddhist king from the Maurya Empire, is explored to link it to the basic principle of the ethical religion that is promoted in *IDS*. For instance, Asoka, for Thass, is a primal figure to spread the *Dhamma* as ethics across the subcontinent through peace and non-violence. Asoka is praised for spreading the Buddhist word through the written form across regions. Asoka, the name, hence is reinterpreted as *A-Soka* – somebody who negates suffering to spread peace and joy across the space (Pandithar: 14). Hence the topography of the country is recreated as a narrative where a Buddhist belonging and civilization is remembered. For instance, Thass treats all the Tamil (Dravidian) kings in succession from Pandias, Cholas, and Cheras as Buddhists who built *vihars* and cities such as Maduraipuram (Madhurai), Kanchipuram, Thirisirapuram (Trichy), Mavalipuram (Mahabalipuram), and Chidambarapuram (Chidambaram). *Puram* (space) is identified as a space of knowledge production and dissemination, not of ritual authority. It is

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identified by its contribution to Dravidian civilization such as language, and the scholarship on literature, grammar, maths, and medicine (Pandithar: 15). Thass falls back on a Tamil ancestry, assertively reclaiming a caste-less location, which produces a critical region-specific anti-caste civilization that is produced in the vernacular. He claims language itself as a critically open space for a caste-less past.

For Thass the entry of the figure *mlecchas* (*vesha Brahmanas*) is about an entry of an enclosed way of life into the *Indhirar* space. The space, more than being open and active, located people and locked them into places of caste. This way of life, Thass condemns, is deceptive, self-centered, fake, and truth-less. He calls it the *mlechha* way of life, which was anti-truth as it embodied falsehood. He follows and confirms this with the Indo-Aryan migration theory, just like the other anti-caste intellectuals of his time. However, Thass is also different from others as he takes references from *Soolamani* and *Naradhiya Sangath Thelivu* to imply that the caste way of life and Brahminism are impostors, which alienates oneself as a foreigner to one's own self.[22] He suggests, therefore, that anti-caste or caste-lessness, in many ways, was spatially precedent to caste in *Indhirar Dhesam* (21).

Even the Tamil terms *paapan* and *paapathi*, which refers to *vesha Brahmanas*, seem to refer to those who "look after" or "follow" the *Dhamma* referring to the *poorva* Buddhists. These terms were used without any meaning by the *mlechhas* – Thass

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[22] Thass considers that the Brahmins migrated from Persia. He calls them variously as *arya mlechhar* and *vesha Brahmana*. Caste is an immunized way of life that locks people into names that do not open to others. And Brahminism is fundamentally against life. *Vesha Brahmanas* were also called as *akkaraiyorothor* – people from the other side, and they practiced deception and pulled people into deceit. This is, indeed, typical of the Iranian Sassidian migration theory being suggested and Thass holding to that. Even as the first part of the book depicts a positive and an ideal memory of space that is open and active; however, a deceptive way of life that is self-centric is imposed through an Aryan imposition of closed life, Thass narrates. Though this sounds as if Thass uncritically follows the inputs from Orientalist researches that proposed an Aryan migration theory; however, he claims that he takes these instances from Tamil resources such as *Mungulai Nool* by Sendhanrivagara Devar and *Pingalai Nool* by Mandala Purudan (Pandithar, 2010:21-22). This also reflects Bergunder's argument, which I discussed in the third chapter, that Subaltern anti-Brahminical groups reinterpreted the Aryan-migration theories by bringing up their own resources against Brahminical hegemony during the colonial period.

complains that this way of deceit is to steal, without any actual meaning or practice, the form but not the content of life. According to Thass, only those who stayed in the *sangha* and practiced the *Dhamma* diligently towards enlightenment were called *paapan*. He claims that the *mlechha* way of life, founded on untruth, is also deceptive (23). A sense of loss and a cry towards a civilizational memory seem to structure Thass' narrative. *Paapar* and *Paapini* is then defined by a story of stealth – a *mlechha* life entwined particularly by self-aggrandizement instead of kindness, peace, bondage-less and empathetic life of love. Communication is at the ground of such a life, not ex-communication. Buddha becomes that figure of contention and recreation in *Indhirar Dhesam* against the *arya mlechha.*[23]

In this war over names, Thass claims that even the term Brahmin belongs to *poorva* Buddhism. This Sanskrit word shares its meaning with the Tamil *andhanar* and Pali *Arahat*, he explains. They were Buddha-like figures who do not have any bondage, and those who could love everyone and everything without any discrimination could be called so. However, *Andhanars* were one in a million according to Thass. They lived a life of kindness, peace, empathy, detachment, following the Buddha-ideal. Whereas, *Vesha Brahmanas* were ones with self-desire who practiced deceit as a way of life. And their regime was one of lies and self-aggrandizement, though they imitated the Buddhist way of life only to destroy and violate it (Pandithar: 24-25).

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[23] Thass states that the *arya mlechhas* migrated from Persia, and they possessed a fairer skin-tone, a different culture, food pattern, and particularly they worshipped the fire through sacrifice. He particularizes them as a group of people who kept the women away for seven days during their menstruation time. Thass uses different figures such as Nandan, the king, Ashvaghosha, the Buddhist monk, within the *IDS* narrative to articulate the information that was propounded by the CMS missionary Rev. Charles Theophilius Ewold Rhenius (1790-1838) in his Hindu country's history. These figures were used within the narrative to validate the argument that deception was a mode to acquire an unethical status – a *vesha* – that which is unreal, in the country where indigenous caste-less groups lived a life of truth. Accordingly, Thass suggests that this life of *vesha* though scrupulously imitated and stole the Buddhist way of life, ultimately, destroyed and violated the basic principle of life in *Indhirar Dhesam* (25-27).

Thass accounts that Buddhist practices such as the distribution of *aval prasadham* – milk-mixed-rice-flakes dish within the *viharas* and *Upanayana* – the thread worn around the body; *Viradham* – fasting and eighteen kinds of *yagas* – offerings (28-33) were fundamentally practices that insisted ethical action and right conduct. Whereas, the *mlechhas*, he claims, took these practices and spoiled them completely. He argues that self-interest and protection instead of love and compassion, promotion of wealth and consumption instead of charity and help, greed and accumulation of power instead of wisdom and insight were the basis on which such practices were imitated and destroyed. Hence a life of pleasure within gargantuan structures were created to destroy what was *poorva*. The practice of communitas was converted into an ingrained institution of deceptive immunitas.

Thass' critical move suggests that the *poorva* Buddhist claim could be treated as claim towards a civilizational difference against the *mlechhas*. The Aryan is one who sacrifices life to the fire to protect oneself. The *mlechha*'s life is not constituted through an equality of action. It does not foreground an ethical life shaped as gift-giving and obligatory-debt to the other. If Hindus claim caste as a civilization sanctioned through divine sanitation and immunization, Thass reclaims pre-caste life-world as an ethical civilization which counters self-centred, consumptive life. Things and property mattered within caste-civilization. For Thass, actions mattered over material, hence, communication becomes the origin of the community as an originary sociality. A constant exposure to an outside, in sharing with the others all the limits, as finite beings seem to mark the *poorva* Buddhist claim for civilization against *mlechha* Brahminism. This caste-less political – *poorva* Buddhism hence, signifies a community disposed to sharing, which is a civilizational community that is conscious of its constitutive, communicative experience. Caste here is considered anti-Buddhist, therefore, anti-

civilizational. It is considered as the most anti-social, anti-communicative, and anti-communal relationship as it sanctions non-fusion as a law.[24]

To explicate this, Thass explores caste-lessness as an action-oriented principle, where ethics conceives and orients truth, and thereby he creates a textuality of caste-lessness in *IDS*. For instance, Thass calls the embodied being as *than-mei* – self-truth. One who realises one's being attains enlightenment according to the Buddhist ethos. Hence an enriching expanse of knowledge-seeking, giving and taking seem to mark a civilizational view of life. This way of life also produced epistemic texts – that of law, philosophy, numbers, medicine, literature, grammar, and art. These embodiments were produced and practiced in spaces such as *vihars*. Thass states that knowledge produced in these spaces, primarily as self-truth, are shared as a gift and a debt, through kindness and compassion, to the other (35). Action, knowledge, being, and truth were apparently linked in such a view of life. Hence, unlike the mischievous dichotomy between the spiritual-inner and the material-outer, Thass views and conceptualises a steady flow and continuity of the inner and outer – of the particular and the universal, of the singular-plural. Hence, he seems to state that caste was never a sacral inner space of secrecy in Indian civilization. Everything had to be shared as a gift and an obligation – this is a civilizational ideal for a community to practice ethics. Hence the way of the Buddha was largely an experience-based episteme in practice, according to Thass.

Sathi, the Tamil word for caste, itself is reinterpreted for such an orientation towards life as action and achievement. The term is made to mean as *sadhithal* – to achieve. Thass argues that *sathi* can only mean achievement of a language. One can equip, access, and use a language such as Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Marathi, Sanskrit, or Pali, and that would be one's *sathi* – one's own achievement. *Sathi*, in an action-

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[24] See the discussion on Nancy, Blanchot, and Esposito in the second chapter.

achievement mode of life, would mean that somebody is Tamil *sathi*, Kannada *sathi*, or

Marathi *sathi* (Pandithar: 37). The terms such as those envisioned in the *varna* theory

such as the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra are re-interpreted as terms that

share the same meaning within Buddhism in three different languages – Pali, Sanskrit,

and Tamil. Thus, *Arahat, Brahmin,* and *Andhanar* – for the enlightened teachers;

Arayan, Kshatriya, and *Arasan* – for the rulers; *Vyapari, Vaishya,* and *Vaaniyan* – for

the business people; and *Soosthirar, Shudra,* and *Soothirar* – for the farmers were

nominal equivalents in Pali, Sanskrit and Tamil respectively. They were work-related

names that were based on achievements in one's life. However, the *mlechhas*

misinterpreted them meaninglessly into a ritualized sanction of divinity through *varna*

shrama dharma just for self-protection, Thass narrates (40-41).

For instance, Thass twists the meanings of *vedas* and *sastras*, which were

meaninglessly ritualized in Brahminism. He calls *vedham* as *bedham.* The *tiri bedha*

vaakiyam (*the three vedas*), he claims, were originally Buddhist ethical texts. They

were understood as utterance-based knowledge books within Buddhism, which were

meaninglessly copied by the *vesha Brahmanas* to be called *vedha vaakiyam* just to earn

money. Copying texts without relevance and context were unethical acts to make

money. They were signatures of *mlechha* worship and scholarship (Pandithar: 136).

Ethics, Thass confirms, seem to orient communication and relationships in

Indhirar Dhesam. One is related with what they do and act; not with what they were

born as. *Mlechhas*, who took up the role of Brahmins, made the identities birth-related

and fixed, thereby, creating falsehood in the name of upper and lower castes. Besides,

they also branded those who protested and practiced against this life of caste, the

poorva Buddhists, as untouchables and Parayars (Pandithar: 43). Thass argues that

work-names were converted into caste names which made life in the subcontinent

completely lawless and truth-less. A life of laziness was promoted in the name of caste (Pandithar: 44). *Poorva* Buddhism forged identities through ethical action; but practices such as molestation, consumption, and sexual promiscuity were spread through *vesha* Brahminism (Pandithar: 45). Falsehood indeed was promoted as caste life by the *vesha Brahmanas* in the subcontinent (Pandithar: 46).

However, caste-experience as civilizational violence is not just reduced to untouchability. Firstly, Brahminism and caste were considered as *vesham* in Thass' hermeneutic. Thass also suggests that many concepts, icons, and symbols that were genuinely Buddhist in content and form were indeed abducted through deception. This is violation, he claims. Particularly, the Buddha became *sangha harar − sankarar*, *sangha dharmar*, and *sangha mitrar −* names that were given to Buddha for instituting the idea of a commune through *sangha*. But the *vesha* Brahmins adapted it to subject the others into their power (Pandithar: 48). Even the *shiva* concept, he claims, was created from the Buddha. He argues that the physical attributes of the Buddha were used for a mythic figure such as the *shiva*, and *vesha* Brahminism thrived through creating a new cult around *vibuthi −* ashes (48-49). Yoga was used for *Saivism*, Thass claims. And where earlier there were no offerings of food or money, or prayers for salvation, or rituals as such, this new sect by *vesha* Brahmins in the name of *Saivism* was to create wealth and power. Where the *poorva* Buddhists claimed salvation through self-effort towards the immediate other, *vesha* Brahmins countered it through offerings and sacrifice to a transcendental other (Pandithar: 50).

Not just that, Thass also describes that this masking (*vesham*) against truth was itself violence against the land (52-53). Words were violated into rituals where they do not mean anything. "An action oriented thought and life of the country was violated and converted into a compassion-less consumption and self-desire driven caste society," in

his words – *kaarunyamatra pusippu, perasaimikka viruppu* (53). For Thass, words do not become meaningless rituals (56). They are meant for communication – the basis for a community. Hence a complete discourse on civilizational violence is mapped by Thass, where a memory that precedes caste is floated as an originary sociality.

Mythic figures such as Sambhavar and Nandanar, who were treated as untouchables within Hinduism, appear as Buddhist intellectuals within *IDS*, who question the falsehood and deceptive life of the so-called *Brahmanas*. While they exposed the trickeries of the fraudsters, Brahminism branded them as untouchables and killed them through treason within the narrative (Pandithar: 58). Names particularly were used to value meaning within Buddhism. Thass differentiates this mode to state that the *mlechhas* used names to demean and defame life. Words such as *para-naai* and *para-parundhu* – "Paraya Dog and Paraya Owl" (59) were used to demean life as such, he states.

Along with Nandan, Ashvaghosha – the Buddhist monk – as a character within the narrative also exposes the *mlechha* life of falsehood, beggary, and meaningless learning of language to practice and maintain untruth. Ashvaghosha accuses the *arya mlechhas* as *agnanigal* – anti-thinkers/intellectuals (Pandithar: 67-68). Ashvaghosha, as a figure within the narrative of *IDS*, recreates the civilizational memory, to expose the deceptive nature of the *mlechha* violence. He re-describes the basic concepts which were ritually claimed within Hinduism, through materially reclaiming it as Buddhist civilization. *Vesham* was against meaningful ethical action. And, Thass' Ashvaghosha rejects the *mlechha* life as one that is linked to the worship of fire, where many animals are offered as sacrifice. Hence Brahminism is characterised as an other-worldly falsehood that is characterised by incorporation of fire-worship, ritual offering to fire, and *Siva Aalayangal* (Shiva temples) to perpetuate *vesha* Brahminism (Pandithar: 77).

Thass invariably produces a hermeneutic of compassion and understanding as a basis for a caste-less community (*poorva* Buddhism) against caste-immunity (*vesha* Brahminism) that divides people into upper and lower castes through hate and self-indulgence. In this violation, perhaps, names were appropriated to destroy their meaning, as imitation (*vesham*) was to deceive and reject people. Thass interprets that, perhaps, violence was civilizational because violence against the Buddhists – the indigenous people of *Indhirar Dhesam* – was against the right over names. *Poorva* Buddhists became untouchable because they lost their value of/for names. Thass describes that the *vesha Brahmanas* violently introduced caste into the achieved languages of the region (*Sathi* meant to achieve a language). *Sathi* became frozen and ossified as *Jathi*. What meant as achievement in languages became a discourse on high and low castes through Brahminism. The work-names were converted into caste names (Pandithar: 95).

For instance, Thass laments that work-names became meaningless caste-names. *Nyaya Alakar* (*Just Measurer*) became a caste-name – *Nayakar*. Those who double (*iratippu*/*irettiyar*) the income and do good business became a caste called *Reddiyar* (*Reddy*). Industrious names such as *chettu vaipavar* (*one who keeps bunds*) became a caste-name – *Chettiyar*. The *vesha Brahmanas* also named themselves as *achari*, *appa* and *rao* such as – Gunda Achari/Appa/Rao, Beema Achari/Appa/Rao, and Thima Achari/Appa/Rao (Pandithar: 97). And *sann-aalar* – those who did all the six jobs of a Buddhist properly – became *sandalar* (*chandala*) in this discourse of names. *Kodun Thamizh* (Malayalam) speaking *Nyayar* (*Just People*) were called *Thiyar* (*dangerous people*) by the *vesha Brahmanas*, whereas Thass claims that those who were rebuked as *Thiyar* were originally Buddhist scholars who spoke against those *vesha nayars* who

took into Brahminism (97-98). Thass attempted to recreate a civilizational meaning to those names which were violated through caste-deceit.

Moreover, Thass states that through deification of statues, seeds, and dung ash, Buddhism was completely destroyed, but not before re-deploying itself as Saivaite in the South and Vaishnavaite in the North of *Indhirar Dhesam* (101-112). Thass in this last part of the *sarithiram* presents various myths and stories within Hinduism to counter-read them and create a dialectical hermeneutic. In his claim over truth against falsehood, Thass creatively weaves interpretations that denote as well as connote a much egalitarian vocabulary. This was to pitch a counter-hermeneutic against a nuanced Brahminism that claims one's superiority of the self by deception and despise of the other, to consider the other as lowly, and deprive them the basic value of life (Pandithar:114).

For instance, Thass narrates the stories of *Meenakshi Amman*, *Hiranya Kasipu*, *Vinayaka*, *Garuda*, *Krishnan*, and *Vishnu*. He counter-reads them creatively to weave a very interesting story that is linked with the figure or the trope of the Buddha. In his hermeneutic against Brahminism, he creates a story as counter-myth to each of the mythical figures. In the Hiranya Kasipu and Prahaladha story, Thass ascertains and factualises that Hiranya, a Buddhist king who questioned the *vesha Brahmanas*, was murdered by deceit, where a Brahmin wore a lion mask (*singha vesham* and not *narasimham* – not the lion-man) to kill him. Thass' hermeneutic also primarily questions how can a God-concept kill somebody. "Does a God kill people, and if it has to use deception, it is God at all?" (109), he questions. Thass in this re-reading reasons whether the myth was at all possible as *sarithiram*.

Similarly, Meenakshi Amman's story, whose temple at Madurai is very famous even today, is narrated as one of deception. She is a rich woman in Thass' narrative, who the *mlechhas* deceive and grab her wealth to build a temple in her name, only to feed the *vesha* Brahmins (27). King Nandan, in *IDS*, is killed through immolation deceived by the *mlechhas*. He figures prominently as a mythical trope within *saivism* as an untouchable saint, which Thass, in the voice of Ashvaghosha vehemently rejects (88-89). In Thass' retelling, Nandan's empire and his palace are taken over by the *mlechhas* in Tanjore. This story is narrated as one of defeat over *samana munivargal* (*Samanas* or *Sramanas* – Thass uses both words – who were against *Brahmanas*) in Tanjore, where the Saivaites killed the Buddhists and Jains by deceit, and those defeated were called untouchables (Pandithar: 90-92). Thass' counter-narrative was an attempt to historicize the defeat as deceit. And multiple figures, such as Meenakshi Amman and Nandan were used as tropes to counter Hindu myths and make *sarithiram* as a memory against violence.

Thass prominently used hermeneutics to create counter-myths and explanations apart from historicised rejection of Hindu myths. One of the primary motives of such creative hermeneutic was to spin a Buddhist story around such *mleccha* myths. *Vinayaga* as the elephant-face God is one such story which is ridiculed in Thass' *sarithiram*. Thass questions how this could be possible but for just making money and consumption. Thass clarifies that Gods were created just to run religion-shops by the *vesha* Brahmins. Besides, he states that it is none other than Buddha who was called the *nayagar* (*the leader or the chief*). He extrapolates the word *vinayagar* as *sabha-nayagar* and *gana-nayagar*, particularly meaning the leader of the community (*sangha/sabha*) which has come to mean *vi-nayagar*. The elephant-face God was a consumptive spin-off by the *mlechhas* to make money, he claims (120-123).

Similarly, Krishnan is *kiruteenan*, a Buddhist king, for Thass. Every name is an opportunity for an interpretative reclamation of a hermeneutic for Buddhist ethics, as the figures are Brahminised and Hinduised – made unethical. To Thass, they were de-Buddhisized, and his attempt was to re-Buddhisize them through a creative hermeneutic within the Tamil region. He states that *kiruteenan* as a figure is prevalent in the *mullai* (forest) region as *manivannan* and *karudavaaganan* – Buddhist names. The figure was systematically (ab)used by the *mlecchas* through the *krishna leela* story to make money and deceive the masses. This was against history, Thass ascertains (123-127).

Vishnu's statues were often Buddha's statues. Many such statues, he claims, were used to create a pantheon of Gods for the Hindus (127). History was not created; false stories were spread by *arya vesha Brahmanas* among the illiterate indigenous masses. This indeed affected the truth-seekers, who were the *poorva* Buddhists, as they were branded as untouchables and the meaning of their names – *Chandala*, *Thiya* and *Paraya* were violated as if for eternity, he laments (128). This ended-up in the closing down of *arap palligal* (ethical schools), which promoted laziness and ignorance (Pandithar: 129). Caste, hence, was not just violence, but it was inaction and thoughtlessness in *IDS*.

Thass attempts to claim the reserves of the language, in modernity, which were produced as books through print, as having a caste-less Buddhist legacy. The book that was particularly used to mobilize the Hindu majority for the Indian nationalist freedom movement against the British – the *Geetha* – was called as a plagiarised text promoted by the *vesha Brahmanas* (Pandithar: 130). A Buddhist story of ethics (*Garna Rajan Kadhai*) was tampered and fictionalized to fabricate the *Bhagavath Geetha*. He argues that in its place, acts of selfishness, violence, and fratricide were celebrated just to iconize the centrality given to the *vesha Brahmanas* (133). Thass maintains that even an

iconic text of the Hindu civilization – that justifies a hermeneutic of *immunitas* – was originally a Buddhist text, which was later fabricated into a text of false-hood by the *vesha Brahmanas*.

No texts were written by the *mlechhas*, which foregrounded communication and community. The *vesha Brahmana* texts, Thass elaborates, celebrated fire-worship, whereas the *poorva* Buddhist texts emulated the *sangha* stories (135). One forcefully immunized the word through fire whereas the other communized the word through *sangha* (community). Accordingly, in this dialectical hermeneutic, self-protection and self-centrism marked the Brahminical *immunitas*, whereas gift and debt as action-based-ethics marked the Buddhist *communitas*.

Thass particularly mentions that *Manu Smrithi* and *Manu Dharma Shastra* of the *vesha Brahmanas* as anti-knowledge, as they were against a long-list of knowledge seekers, teachers, and writers in Buddhism. They were unjust and unethical texts – *aneedhi nool* and *adhanma nool* (Pandithar: 138-141). This comportment of textuality was called anti-Buddhist as it did not generate the meaning of life as truth. These false texts were used as tools to eradicate the *poorva* Buddhists from *Indhirar Dhesam* (Pandithar: 142-143). Though *Manu Dharma Shastra* was a thoughtless text, in the hands of *vesha Brahmanas* it was used as a weapon to eradicate the *poorva* Buddhists. However, Thass also lists many Siddhars who had written against the *vesha* Brahminism through an alternative textual legacy. They were Pambaati Siddhar, Siva Vaakiyar, Patinathar, Thayumanavar, Sambavanar, Kaduvelli Siddhar, Agape Siddhar, Idaikattu Siddhar, and Kuthambai Siddhar (Pandithar: 148-149). These Buddhists, he says, lived as a caste-less community in a space called *cheri* – where everyone stays together. This is against the contemporary meaning of the word which means an outcaste ghetto or slum. *Cheri* is a space of caste-lessness, where the *vesha Brahmanas*

were repelled and rejected for their false caste-rituals, false vedic sacrifices, false epics, *smritis*, *sivalingam* and false religious shops, according to Thass.

In this contest over civilizational difference, Thass narrates that a depressed classes' narrative was promoted during the colonial times devoid of any civilizational claims. The *poorva* Buddhists were destroyed and lowered. They were not allowed in the *oor*. They had no access to palatable water, no clean dress, they were made unapproachable and untouchable (Pandithar: 150). A civilizational violence in the name of caste was unleashed on them. It annihilated their corporal being – their very presence. As untouchables, they were eliminated and made absent from social and culturally active relations. Hence, as discussed earlier, they provided the full definitional conditions for civilizational violence. *Poorva* Buddhists as untouchables, at the zenith of civilizational violence, remained untouchable, uncrossable, unseeable, unhearable, unapproachable, and uncommunicable. They were pushed outside time and space.

Thass' hermeneutic, however, recovers a civilizational memory through a creative hermeneutic, which makes temporal and spatial dynamics open to a civilizational communitas. *Indhirar Dhesam*, in its contest against violent immunitas, becomes a dynamic space that flows with time – a space where *vithai*, *buthi*, *eegai*, and *sanmarkam* (knowledge, compassion, right conduct, and action) determined the identity of its people and history. As these very practices were made depressed, Thass laments that the land also became depressed and was identified by falsehood and trickeries in the name of caste and false religion (152). Thass' history is a hermeneutic of rejection – of caste immunitas primarily, to recover a civilizational community of caste-lessness.

Thass' deconstruction of Brahminical domination and reconstruction of Buddhist egality, through his interpretative exercise, indeed provide an ideological and historical understanding of being-broken (Dalit) as a community for generations. Buddhism was not seen as alien or was not alienated, it was made familiar within the culture of the people and inspires them to wage a civilizational battle against caste. For this purpose, Thass equally rejected the terms such as Depressed Classes, or untouchables and *panchamas* (153). This was a direct statement against nationalist reformers of those times, who particularly advocated depressed class upliftment for selfish purposes. Thass instead, as a Buddhist, sincerely called to involve oneself in efforts aiming at resurrecting an originary sociality as community in *IDS*. In such an insurrectionary looking-back of the past, and a prophetic call towards the future, Thass' *IDS* was a civilizational claim. This community negates caste and affirms an affiliation that shares a Dravidian/Tamil cultural past as it emphasized the establishment of a communitary society.

Thass' interpretative methods and evidences involved a fusion of philosophical concepts of Buddhism, Buddhist geographical locations, metaphysical descriptions, and Buddhist literatures that were poetic and fictional. However, his interpretative method also seems to bear the mark of a dialectics between Brahminism and Buddhism as a history of conflict. Temporal linearity and spatial description are creatively explored. For instance, he interprets the Vaishnavite myth of Vamana and Bali to reconstruct a different history. Thass locates Mahabali in historical time and space – in the seventh century CE, at Mahabalipuram, through his references. He rejects the Hindu Vamana-Bali myth – the Vishnu avatar story of victory over the *asura* king, out rightly, and does not even discuss the same in his description. For, Thass, this myth is a content to be re-read to create an alternative history.

Thass states that Mahabali is a Buddhist king from Mahabalipuram, who ruled the southern *Baratha Gandam*, one thousand and two hundred years ago. He constructed Buddha-*sangha Vihars* throughout his country and towards his later years, attained *nirvana* on an *ammavasai* (lunar eclipse), in the Tamil month *Puratasi,* at the Vengadam hills (now Thiruppathi). As source references, Thass provides information from rock edicts and plates excavated from Vellur (*T,* Vol 2: 40-41). For Thass, this recovery of history/interpretation does not stop here. From this information, he reconstructs the dialectical history of conflict between Brahminism and Buddhism, through the references from the Tamil epic *Manimekalai.*

With reference to the untouchable saints within Saivism and Vaishnavism – the Nayanmars and Alvars – Thass recovers a Buddhist history. He takes two untouchable saints – Thirupaanar, the Alvar, and Nandanar, the Nayanmar. Paanar, Thass clarifies through the references, is the son of Mahabali, a Buddhist Bhikku, who was usurped into Vaishnavism as an Alvar. While Nandan, a Buddhist king, was subsumed into Saivism as a Nayanmar – but both only as untouchable Parayar saints. It is a cooption, explains Thass. He places this cooption in the year 1814, where, in a fight over temple rights and social position, the Brahmins and *Kammalas* (the artisan-craftsmen, sculptors and metal workers in temples) divided the caste society into right and left-hand castes.[25] Thass describes, that for want of majority, the Parayars were included into the right-hand castes along with the Brahmins. The Buddhist figures from all castes were co-opted as Alvars and Nayanmars but for the Kammalas, who were in opposition and

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[25] Right-hand (*Valangai*) and Left-hand (*Idangai*) refer to a caste-based dual classification and division of communities in South Indian society. It was in vogue, arguably, from the eleventh century to the nineteenth century. The *valangai* faction was made up of castes with an agricultural base, while the *Idangai* was made of castes with a manufacturing base. Reportedly, the right-hand faction was numerically superior and politically organized than the left-hand faction in the nineteenth century (Ghurye, 1991:359).

were coopted into the left-hand castes. Thus, Thass explains, there are no Kammala Saiva and Vaishnava saints.

Thass, while mixing his resources to construct a Buddhist history of conflict with Vaishnavite and Saivite Hinduism, also plays with temporality. He links the seventh century with the nineteenth century, back and forth, to do a resistant reading of a myth to make it an alternative imaginary and history. He delimits the concept of time by playing with it imaginatively. He re-converts the Alvar and Nayanmar saints into Buddhism. He recovers them for a Buddhist imaginary. His anti-caste hermeneutics treat folk deities such as Muthan, Muniyan, and Karuppan – as names of figures that had an inherent link with the Buddha. Female folk deities such as Kannagi, Kaali, Neeli, Sintha Devi, and Amman were Buddhist nuns, and they were remembered for their service to the community through festivals (Thass cited in Gowthaman: 139-159). Thass temporally divides the history of the country as a space into seven stages of a language, namely – sound period, script period, grammar period, poetry period – that coincided with the *sangham* period, couplets period, epics period, and lyrical period (*Aadhina Kaalam)*. Historical time was treated as the time (or the evolution) of a language – here Tamil, as Thass interprets time as language.

His historical project, interestingly, re-converts Jesus Christ, Isaiah, Elijah, David and Moses – all Semitic figures[26] – as those who preached the *Dhamma* ethics, and who were primarily enlightened Buddhist teachers (*T*, Vol. 1: 570). He compared the Dalits with the oppressed Jews. Old Testament, particularly the Genesis chapter, was given a Buddhist re-reading by comparing and using content from *Ashtanga* and *Kundalini* yoga. They explained the meaning of the Biblical miracles (*T*, Vol. 1:567-

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[26] It is to be noted that the Buddha, the Christ, Prophet Muhammad – and other Semitic figures – drawing on the sources from the three religions, are the most compared during the twentieth century discourses on world religion, especially in the context of emergent textualities from/on the "Orient" (Gwynne, 2014).

569). His Buddhist interpretation is one of freedom, imagination and speculative rendering, while, comparing the Biblical verses with the Tamil literary verses.

Thass interpreted the Bible through an experiential hermeneutic, where the Dalits could relate with what he wrote. Even if this could have been a translation from works in English, of this kind, during this period, as there were similar Christian-Buddhist comparisons, Iyothee Thass' exercise with space and time was to create an anti-caste cosmopolitan – a communitas which is primarily a gift and an obligation that belongs to everyone and no one owns it. The hermeneutics, embedded in this act, seeks to achieve multiple possibilities. "The History" of the most oppressed by the caste system is interpreted, by Thass, as antithetical to, but also, independent of Brahmins, or any caste group that would privilege itself by marginalizing the out-caste as its/their other.

Perhaps, Thass' civilizational claims were also over texts and textuality – particularly a right over writing and over tradition whose context was made possible through print and modernity. Not only does he link and compare so many textual traditions, but also practices a subversive reading of those texts. Through this, he copiously converts Saivism, Vaishnavism, Jainism, Siddha tradition, and the Semitic religions as content for a casteless Tamil Buddhism. He maps the legacy of Tamil texts through drawing a genealogy of epics that were didactic, grammar texts, ethical treatises, Siddha and Buddhist medicine and poetics. While on the one hand print facilitated the caste public to own and create Tamil language as Saivaite and Vaishnavaite, Thass constructed the language for casteless Buddhism. He continuously

recovered the Tamil texts, textuality, and authors through a creative interpretation of names and words.[27]

Hence, for Thass, interpretation is resistant creativity. In this imaginative exercise he plays with historiography, especially, with concepts such as space and time. He brings together Buddha, Bali, Nandan, Paanan, along with Moses, Isaiah, and Jesus Christ but also different folk deities as well as vedic heroes in his creative *sarithiram.* He brought them as a part of Buddhist-Jaina-Siddha civilizational legacy against Brahminism. He reinterprets most of the Indian festivals through a Buddhist lens by working on the words and their meaning. He splits them, plays with them, and creatively make them a meaning against caste and Brahminism.[28] It is simultaneously an active re-reading and writing through affective research. It is linked with the creation of a textual imaginary that shares space with memory, loss, and dislocation along with biographical and creative speculation. In this, it is an attempt, from the "Dalit-Subaltern" political, to gain inroads into historiography, while, dislocating and transforming the Brahminical caste-Hindu regime and location of knowledge practice.

For instance, Thass does not accept the socio-anthropological constitution and description of the word *Parayar* – that they were meek and weak, or they were

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[27] For instance, Thass continuously interpreted the prefix *thiru* as *thiri*. Hence *Thirukural, Thirukadagam, Thirumanthiram, Thiruvaasagam, Thiruvenpa,* and *Thirumalai* became *Thirikural, Thirikadagam, Thirimanthiram, Thirivaasagam, Thirivenpa,* and *Thirimalai,* where *thiri,* the word, relates to the Buddhist *thiripitaka.* From the years 1831 to 1847, *Thirukural* was used as an important text for a casteist and religious appropriation. Thass rejected the term *Thiru,* but compared *Thirukural* with the three *pitakas* of Buddhism. *Dhamma Pitaka, Sudha Pitaka,* and *Vinaya Pitaka* were compared with *Mupaal* – the three parts of the *Kural,* namely – *Arathupaal, Porutpaal,* and *Kamathupaal* (Gowthaman, 2004:164). Thass also wrote a series of articles and notes in *Tamizhan* on *Thirikural* verses and *Aathichudi* verses. He interprets these texts and creates a Tamil textuality on Buddha. *Bagavan, malarmisai aeginan, virundhu,* and *neethaar perumai* in *Thirikural* were to relate to the Buddha. The *Aathichudi* verses such as – *Aran seyya virumbu* (*Have desire to do good deeds*), *ookamadhu kaividel* (*Do not give up self-confidence*), *aerpadhu igazhchi* (*To beg is bad*), *oadhuvadhu ozhiyel* (*Never stop learning*) and *thayyar sol kaelel* (Don't trust others words) were to mean an ethics based Buddhist guideline to life. Thass reconstructs meaning by interpreting these classical texts in Tamil for a Buddhist hermeneutic.

[28] Buddha's birth, monk-hood, Enlightenment (*Nirvana*) and death (*Parinirvana*) were all interpreted to be celebrations on *vaikasi pournami, maasi pournami, panguni pournami* and *margazhi pournami* – days related with the calendar of the moon (*T*, Vol. 2: 355).

untouchable, poor and socially ostracized. These narratives were scientifically premised on descriptive accuracy and evidential historicity. These were, for him, to be rejected and reinvented. In his history research, *Paraya* as a concept is to be derived and reconstituted to nullify the available category. Hence, he works with the word and interprets it imaginatively. He argues that the word *Parayar* is a derivative of the word *piraiyar* or *pirar* (*others*). He argues, through references, that they were "Others," the ancient Buddhists – *purva bouddhargal* (*purvam* means ancient as well as holistic), who did not accept the Brahminical caste differences, and therefore were condemned by *vesha Brahmanas* (*deceptive Brahmins*) as untouchable Parayars.

Thass claimed that the "knowledgeable Dravidian Buddhists" were defeated by the "crooked machinations of *arya mlechhas*" and were relegated falsely as untouchables (Thass cited in Ravikumar and Azhagarasan: xvii). But he also suggests that Parayars were the ones who spoke the truth – *parai* is to speak. Hence anyone who speaks the truth and exposes falsehood were called as the *Parai-yor.* Thass claimed that they were moral leaders of the people who relentlessly intervened and exposed the interloper's trickery, greed, and falsity (Thass cited in Aloysius, 2010:249). A dialectical hermeneutic as a history of conflict between *vesham* and *purvam* through Brahminism and Buddhism as immunitas versus communitas was creatively woven.

For this work on religion, Thass includes the *samana*, *sramana*, and *siddhar* traditions for an inclusionary *Bouddha Madham* as a way of life against caste and Brahminism. Thass, just like Ambedkar and other anti-caste intellectuals, finds that Buddha's message had the resource to counter caste society by foregrounding an ethics based community. Thass vehemently used a critical hermeneutic to interpret the Tamil literary canon and language for this purpose. His counter-throw was on the Tamil language to envision a caste-less community through Buddhism.

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This chapter critically evaluated Thass' exploration of a textuality on history and religion – *Indhirar Dhesa Sarithiram* (*The History of Indhirar Country*, 2010). Communitas as a concept emerged in Thass' imaginative exercise on caste-lessness. The chapter discussed his dialectical hermeneutics in the early twentieth century, and described how the anti-caste print world which significantly contested the textualities of caste. The Tamil Dalits' use print-journals to create an anti-caste community imaginary in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was discussed in detail. An alternative knowledge practice that prioritized the oral traditions present among the oppressed communities was noted. In Thass, the journalistic-print was used intellectually to retrieve, contest, re-read, and revaluate an anti-caste legacy.

Thass treated history (*sarithiram*) as pedagogy to lay a claim over a civilizational memory against Brahminism and casteism in the early twentieth century. He created a hermeneutic of caste-less-ness to explore the reserves of Tamil by particularly using the language for a counter-interpretation. Ideas such as "looking-back," "turning away," "counter-claim," "insistence and immediacy," "pre-history and community," and "history and re-memoration" worked as modes to conceptualize a caste-less religion in the vernacular. While the caste experience is critically described as civilizational violence, Thass's creative hermeneutic created a community against caste, thus, a civilizational memory through Tamil Buddhism.

IN-CONCLUSION[1]

 This thesis explored Thass' Tamil Buddhism and foregrounded it as caste-less community. Thass' critical exercise with thought, imagination, and history to create an alterity is closely linked with the idea of a "political community"[2] in practice, emerging from the Subaltern constituency with their own resources in the early twentieth century. Thass reversed the gaze on caste-society from the point of view of the outcastes as a Buddhist – *Pirar* – "the other" who is pre-caste and primarily caste-less. He did not concede Sanskrit as the language of the Brahmins/Aryans and Tamil as the language of the Dravidian stock, as Caldwell and other Oriental philologists, as well as Dravidian nationalists had argued. For him both Sanskrit and Tamil are sister languages of Buddhist origin with Pali as their common source. Thass interpreted that Pali, the language of the Buddha, remained an oral language, but Sanskrit and Tamil became written languages through Panini and Agastyar to spread the words of Buddha.

These claims also contest certain received notions that the civilizations are settled and self-generating – characteristic common-sense stories such as Sanskrit or Tamil is the mother of all languages – suggesting a logic that is far beyond. For instance, Tilak who desired *The Artic Home In the Vedas* (1903) propounded that the

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[1] The phrase "In-Conclusion" is used here to mean "sum-up" and "conclude;" but also, not to be conclusive of the propositions, so as to not make the field of study closed but "open-ended." This phrase is also used, keeping in mind, the nascent nature of studies on anti-caste religion and Dalits, and the enriching meanings that it could open-up and expose to when not concluded and enclosed.
[2] Political community is generally referred as the republic (*res publica*, in Latin, means a public-legal community in relation to Nation-State). However, in the Subaltern context of resistance, the "political" implies a field of struggle where contesting groups vie for hegemony. It is "the antagonistic dimension that can be given a form of expression, that will not destroy the political association" (Mouffe, 2005:52).

North Pole was the original home of the Aryans – and thereby Brahmins as well – by using the Vedas for his support. He showed disappointment about the colonialists and Orientalists for not writing enough about the exalted status of Brahmins and their place at the roots of Europe by stating that –

> The whole of the Rig-Veda, any, the Veda and its nine supplementary books have been preserved by the Brahmins of India, 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 (Tilak, 1956:313 quoted in Ayyathurai, 2011:9).

While Tilak wanted to move closer to the European civilization, on the other hand, Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* project argues that the Ancient Egyptian civilization itself can be seen as African. He also maintains that the ancient Egypt and Semitic speaking South West Asia played fundamental roles in the formation of Ancient Greece.[3] He almost suggests that the ancient Greeks were indeed Black. And

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[3] Martin Bernal states that – "I do not advocate a return to the Ancient Model but to a Revised Ancient Model. This accepts the work by 18th and 19th century linguists who demonstrated that Greek is fundamentally an Indo-European language and hence that this indicates a substantial cultural influence possibly migration from the north at a very early period. However, I see no reason why this should conflict with the Greek traditions of settlements from the South and East during the second millennium, which together with subsequent contacts introduced the Egyptian religion, the Phoenician alphabet etc. While both sides agree that the Greek language is a mixture, supporters of the Aryan Model see it as one made up of Indo-European and the unknown language (or languages) of the Pre-Hellenes. As I shall make clear in volume III, I see Greek as an admixture of Ancient Egyptian and West Semitic, both of which belong to the Afro-Asiatic language family, onto an Indo-European base." See, http://www.blackathena.com/outline.php.

in such a project he advocates that a wider migration of languages, ideas, and people.
[4] He states that –

> Dravidian Language family possibly derived from Nostratic originally
> spoken from Iran to India. The best-known contemporary Dravidian
> languages are Tamil and Telegu which still flourish in southern India.
> The extinct language Elamite spoken in eastern Mesopotamia may be a
> branch of Dravidian (Bernal, Vol. 3:700).

Moreover, Thass' claims on the Buddha also reflect certain larger civilization claims that scholars and historians around the world had actively pursued. For instance, the first volume of Will and Ariel Durant's *The Story of Civilization* series, called *Our Oriental Heritage* (1935), takes the reader through the different aspects of civilization (economic, political, moral and mental) through three books.[5] The second book is on "India and her Neighbours," where Buddhism is portrayed as one of the foundations of Indian civilization.

Thass' statements also sound similar to Pollock's claims on Sanskrit and Latin. These arguments reflect his thesis on languages, significantly, those that claim to be both cosmopolitan and vernacular (Pollock, 1998). Pollock also argues that very different cosmopolitan and vernacular practices had existed in the past. Their histories, he says, suggest possible future choices – one between the "national vernacularity" and "unipolar globalism" (Pollock, 2009:567-568). He clarifies that the

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[4] Such comparisons, however, are beyond the scope of this thesis but these similarities indicate a larger network of migrations in the context where advanced research in genetic studies seem to confirm (and settle the debate on) the Aryan migration theory (Joseph, 2017).

[5] *The Story of Civilization* is a "biography" of the western civilization about the culture, art, philosophy, religion, and the rise of mass communication. It considers the living conditions of everyday people throughout the 2500-year period. *The Story of Civilization* is one of the most successful historiographical series in history that also attempts a civilizational claim for the community in the West. See,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Story_of_Civilization#I._Our_Oriental_Heritage_.281935.29.

terms "cosmopolitan" and "vernacular" were modes of literary communication directed toward two audiences – one unbounded, infinite, extensive; and the other bounded and finite. He compares the world of Sanskrit with the world of Latin and states that "the two languages embarked on an extraordinary career of expressive elaboration and spatial dissemination" (571). Sanskrit and Latin were written to be readable across both space and time, producing a sense of belonging that affiliated readers across vast space and time.

In a similar vein, Thass perhaps sees Tamil, Sanskrit and Pali as envisaging an anti-caste "Vernacular Cosmopolitanism" that conjoins notions of local specificity for a universal enlightenment. Thass profusely uses all these languages – Tamil, Sanskrit, and Pali – to create a Buddhist history of India, while not collaborating with the "British Discovery." He just uses the available myths, history, folk-narratives, and literature in Tamil. His effort to read history from within the reserves of Tamil language available to the marginalized community, not only strengthens their agency, but also opens new ways to interpret and understand "culture" beyond caste, and as part of a collective community of experience.

Unlike post-colonial studies that have remained elite by directing itself towards transnationalism and cosmopolitanism, but never towards the vernacular (Shankar, 2012:28) – which is encrypted as caste, the attempts of Tamil Dalits to create a caste-less community in the vernacular cannot just remain elite proposals of transnationalism and cosmopolitanism. Thass' hermeneutic explorations and claims over language just hint the opposite. He exscribes the vernacular as caste-free and caste-less, thereby, calling us to apprehend it in multiple ways. This is an appeal for a necessary turn towards vernacular South Asia to have any "intra-national" and "global" relevance.

As someone who organized his community in the name of *Sathi Betha Matra Dravida Mahajana Sabha* (*Casteless Dravida Mahajana Sabha*), Thass gave content to the idea of caste-lessness, Buddhism, and Tamil community. This is a concrete agenda that relied not only on self-identification as an emancipatory process, but also was created on the idea of anti-caste communitas as a cosmic imaginary, in the early twentieth century Tamil society. It was a Buddhist universal, whose material was local, limited, finite, every day and the untouched.

An alternative view on religion emerges in the Tamil Buddhist case in early twentieth century. Religion seems to be the concern of the ordinary people, and it deals with how they can transform themselves into Gods. In turn, also inspire others to similarly transform through inspiration and guidance. This is a democratic process where men and women emerge into a religious subjectivity. There is also an insistence on activity that is conscious and responsible. This is particularly guided through right conduct, ennoblement of an ethical conscience and social responsibility for all human beings. This is coupled by the belief that salvation and deliverance happen if one walks the path of virtue and compassion. This Subaltern view of religion that insists on change, could be understood as an invitation to understand, realize, and share – a gift – to deliver and liberate the individual and the society. It is understood as an autonomous and pragmatic path of collective religious life, that points out to the possibility of elaborating a religious moral space for modern times (Aloysius, 2004:205-220).

Thus, it was argued that Thass and his Tamil Buddhism claimed a legacy of caste-free cosmology through a cultural attempt that retrieves a "genealogy of loss," of an ingenious kind. It was a resurgence of the earlier suppressed traditions of a culture in a new context. A creative yet critical position that recuperated an anti-caste

tradition for their own emancipation from different sources, particularly, those modernities from past which annihilate caste. It neither eulogized nor censored without differentiating between the actual and the conceptual. It counter-looked caste with an oppositional gaze. The struggle against civilizational violence fashioned a "genealogy of loss" that integrated experience, understood social inheritances, and anchored the living present with a conscious community through civilizational memory. The chapters in this thesis demonstrated such an argument.

The first chapter discussed the studies on caste and religion as essentialist, constructionist, and collaborationist. The chapter envisaged to critique and move away from the essentialist and constructionist frames. In this attempt, it sought to position a critical vantage point to do Dalit studies in the context of colonialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Dalits' engagement with anti-caste religion and community through the modes of history and memory were discussed. Ideas such as "looking-back," "turning away," "counter-claim," "insistence and immediacy" and "pre-history and community," "performative history and re-memoration" were discussed so as to conceptualize religion and subalternity in the vernacular. Moreover, Dalits' critical engagement with colonialism, missionaries, and modernity pushed the thesis to explore community and experience as an important theoretical framework.

The second chapter wove a conceptual framework on community beyond caste and religion as categories. It discussed theories on (lived) experience and community to discuss a feasible method to study texts by Dalits. These theories explored the notions of community in the west, and for India, in the context of Hinduism as a political marker and caste as its cultural marker, it called for a critical exploration of community as a concept. As caste and Hinduism work with the

identities of one's birth which in turn mark the society, an anti-caste communitas – with caste-lessness at its core and as an originary sociality – was proposed by conceptualising communitary experience and experiential community.

The third chapter studied Thass as a discourse and a critique through three trajectories – as Non-Brahmin discourse, as Orientalist discourse, and Anti-Caste critique. Thass' texts on Tamil Buddhism were contextualized by discussing the historical trajectory of studies on him. It discussed how he was made part of an anti-caste discourse as a memory and as a part of Dalit intellectual legacy in the vernacular. The 1990s intellectual climate was explored where new radical anti-caste figures, such as Thass were discovered. Besides, the chapter also suggested that a hermeneutics of experience and community would offer a different way to study Thass' writings.

The fourth chapter evaluated the writings of Thass as a textual possibility for a creative and critical hermeneutic. Thass' texts were conceptualized as caste-less communitas in writing, while it evaluated Thass' exploration of a textuality on history and religion – *Indhirar Dhesa Sarithiram* (*The History of Indhirar Country*, 2010). The chapter discussed his dialectical hermeneutics and described how the anti-caste print world significantly contested the textualities of caste. The Tamil Dalits' use of print-journals to create an anti-caste community imaginary was discussed in detail. Thass' journalistic-print for intellectual use, treatment of history as pedagogy to lay a claim over a civilizational memory against Brahminism and casteism were highlighted. Thus it was argued that while caste was critically described as civilizational violence, Thass' creative hermeneutic exscribed a community against caste by retrieving a civilizational memory through Tamil Buddhism.

Throughout India, the majority of converts out of Hinduism today, as in the past, are significantly Dalit, and the present Indian legal and political system *minoritize* both Dalit and women in this context – in the sense that they are not fully capable of making their own decisions and therefore require supervision (Roberts, 2016:7). Moreover, religious conversion is portrayed in the national discourse as an attack on Indian culture and the innermost essence of the nation itself. This thesis suggests that religion is conceptualized very differently by Thass and Tamil Buddhists, from those imagined by the nationalist public sphere. In thorough borrowing of tropes and inspiration from various religions and regions across the world, and through a radical articulation from vernacular cultural resource, Tamil Buddhism seems to set a different discourse on conversion – in the context where anti-conversion laws advocate that conversion disrupts social cohesion; and Christianity and Islam are portrayed as converting-religions which are made responsible for communal conflict (Adcock, 2014). Thass counters this argument completely and turns the gaze on caste and Hinduism as ultimately responsible for creating conflict and violence.

On a relative note, the mass-conversion of five lakh Dalits to Buddhism in October 1956 under the leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, just seven weeks before his death, is the single-most defining moment of conversion in history "outside the fold." Since then, many Dalits in the sub-continent had converted to *Navayana* Buddhism as "a mass communicative action" in the Ambedkarite sense. The new Buddhism prescribes "the creation of a new collective body, in spirit and in letter" (Choudhary, 2017:18). Scholarship on Ambedkar's Buddhism is far less and getting more importance now, where concepts such as *karuna* (*compassion*), *sunyata* (*nothingness*) and *maitri* (*loving-kindness*) are explored for a philosophical purpose (Kumar, 2013,

2015). Scholars have also studied Ambedkar's Buddhism as emerging from the perspective of "annihilation of caste" or as an assertive "rejection of rejection" (Guru, 2009:212).

However, a systematic study of Neo-Buddhism and Ambedkar's writings on religion as conceptualizing a textuality of ethics are very few. It is also cursory to suggest that a systematic comparison between Ambedkar's Buddhist texts and Thass' Buddhist texts, and various textualities of caste-less community across the subcontinent, though it was not in the purview of this thesis, could be an exploration in comparative ethics and the future of a work such as this. Especially, when studies enquire and explore how an embodied ethical community is exscribed beyond textuality – by prioritizing the vernacular and the region – it could transform the epistemology of "Dalit rage" and would enlighten "the shadows" adequately.

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