
UNIT 3 MODERN DALIT THINKERS

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to familiarize the students with few Dalit thinkers and ideologues in the 18th and 19th century modern Indian society, like Phule, Iyothee Thass, Narayana Guru, Rettamalai Srinivasan, M.C. Rajah and their contribution to Dalit emancipation.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The socio-cultural climate of 19th Century in India, during the British rule aroused sentiments of nationalism among the elite as well as the common people. The privileged classes and castes launched their struggle against colonial rule for self-determination drawing inspiration from dominant traditional social-cultural resources. The persons influenced by the western philosophies not only wanted to challenge the British rule but also questioned the thought-patterns, customs and manners of the upper classes and castes. They had recourse to the socio-cultural traditions that promoted equality, freedom and dignity of human person. New quest for social reform came from people who had experienced more bitterly the inequalities and injustices of the Indian social system. Unlike the dominant cultural tradition that maintained and supported a hierarchical thinking, the values of equality and fraternity were promoted by alternative cultural traditions of Buddhism, Siddhas and so on. The social thinkers and reformers such as Iyothee Thass, Mahatma Phule, Narayana Guru, reinterpreted the world-views of classical Indian traditions (Buddhism, Advaita etc) for the betterment of the society. Some of them imbibed the spirit of Buddhism and expressed their alternative world views for a society based on justice and righteousness. Narayana Guru interpreted the classical concepts of Advaita in a modern manner as an expression of their own existential aspiration and hope. The theory of non-differentiation was applied to the

discriminatory social reality and it was argued that caste differentiation had no basis in reality and that humanity is non-differentiated. This was against the hierarchical view that differential natural elements dominate the different caste or *varna* groups.

3.2 JYOTIRAO PHULE (1827-1890)

Known as Mahatma Jotiba Phule was an activist, thinker, social reformer, philosopher and a revolutionary. His main interests were on ethics, religion and humanism. He was the pioneer of women's education in Maharashtra. He is one of the most important figures in social reform movement in Maharashtra and is rightly called as the father of Indian social revolution. Phule was born in a Mali family in a caste perceived to be inferior caste by certain sections of the society. From his experience of being insulted by family members of his Brahmin friend he faced the divide created by the caste system. He developed the sense of social justice becoming passionately critical of casteism. He firmly believed in education as of vital importance in addressing social inequalities. His influence and remarkable contribution towards education, eradication of caste, empowerment of women and widow upliftment and removal of untouchability are commendable. He is a well known reformist for his efforts to educate women and Dalits. Phule advocated a perspective from Sudra and Adisudra social location situated in the duty soil where they toil and moil against high class or Brahminical perspective to preserve their domination, promoted by the writers of his time who very much influenced the British Government.

For Phule, freedom is very essential for human beings. "When man is free, he can clearly convey his thoughts to people through writing or speech. But if he does not have freedom, then he is unable to communicate his thoughts, however, beneficial they might be to the others, and consequently, they just evaporate into thin air." A free man will never hesitate to claim his rights which are granted by God to all humans. He rests happy only when he gets his rights back.

He formed a Society of Seekers of Truth, *Satya Shodhak Samaj* with the objective of organising masses to liberate the Dalits and to prevent them from exploitations and atrocities done by the dominating castes. He believed in and propagated education to attain equal rights for peasants and lower castes. The main objective of his Samaj was to prevent people's exploitation by the upper caste like Brahmans. Through the *Samaj* he refused to regard the Vedas as *sacrosanct*. He opposed idolatry and denounced thoroughly caste system. He wanted to create a new social system based on freedom, equality, brotherhood, human dignity, economic justice and value devoid of exploitation.

He wished that the present society overthrow the old, unequal and exploitative social system and the values based on it. He attacked blind faith and the faith in the exploitative and oppressive religious books that come up with dominating people in name of gods. His samaj propounded the spread of rational thinking and rejected the need for a Brahman priestly class as educational and religious leaders. With help of Shahu Maharaj, the king of Kolhapur the Samaj spread to the remotest parts of Maharashtra. It carried on the work of removal of superstition vigorously. Phule tore to pieces the misleading myths from the minds of people. He showed people that yielding to fate, astrology and other such rituals and God-men are irrational and absurd.

According to Phule, "God is Creator, Governor, and Protector and who is all Holiness himself." But Manu and others of his class have distorted the idea of

God by attributing the most immoral, inhuman, unjust actions and deeds to the Supreme Being. From this idea of God emerged a social order that dehumanizes the Sudras and the Adisudras. They were exploited in all levels. The Brahmins under the guise of religion controls all spheres of life of Sudras. He tried to remove the factors that breed blind faith. The religious texts and activities are to be tested with rationalism. He characterised blind faith as outwardly religious but in essence politically motivated. He accused them of upholding the teachings of religion and refusing to be rational. At the root of all calamities, maintains Phule is the blind faith in religious books that are said to be created or inspired by God.

3.3 IYOTHEE THASS (1845- 1914)

In the beginning of 20th century, political consciousness in colonial India had two faces; one from the elite-led nationalist movement and another from the subordinated people's quest for freedom. Both groups posed two kinds of independence. While the former sought freedom from the politically powerful British the latter yearned for it from the socio-cultural and religious domination from within. Subaltern consciousness emerged out of this aspiration for freedom from socio-cultural oppression. They sought freedom from the age long oppression of caste hierarchy. Tamil Buddhist Movement initiated by Iyothee Thass a century ago had a similar objective. Tamil Buddhist Movement has not gained much attention of academicians for several reasons. Many collective attempts of subordinate people and their movements have been sidelined in history. An observation made of such sidelining of subaltern emergence would portray a grim picture that those movements, which challenged the dominant ideology, suffered very much in this regard. They lost their significance before the culturally, religiously and politically 'strong' and 'powerful' traditions.

Iyothee Thass Pandithar was born on 20th May 1845. His original name was Kathavarayan. After obtaining expertise of Siddha medicine from his guru Iyothee Doss Kaviraja Pandithar he called himself as Iyothee Doss after his guru. He was well-versed in Tamil, Pali, Sanskrit and English languages. He established Advaitanta Sabha at Nilgiris in 1870 and Dravida Mahajana Sabha in 1891. A search for a paradigm was found in Thass' transition from Advaita to Buddhism. We find In advaitananda sabha his objective was for organizing the downtrodden. By 1890, he preferred to revive Tamil Buddhism, giving an identity to subalterns and constructing a collective consciousness; a construction indeed for their empowerment. Unless one, whether Brahmin or non-Brahmin, has to totally reject Brahman, the absolute, there is no total liberation, Human emancipation, Human Concern. Human liberation is possible only by shattering Brahminical cunning plots. This wisdom emerged in the mind of Iyothee Thass a century ago, for the Tamil Siddhas few centuries ago and for the Buddha two thousand five hundred years ago. Rational and Morality based values; ways and means are the only ways to Human liberation.

Thass had preferential concern towards the children of the marginalized and established educational institutions for them at Chennai. On 19th June, 1907 he started a weekly known as "Oru Paisa Thamizhan" and established Sakiya Bouddharkal Sangam that changed the direction of social and political thinking of Tamil society. At a time when there was opposition from several quarters, it was he who established that Buddhism was the religion of the Tamils particularly that of the Depressed classes. He supported his thesis with documentation and interpreted Tamil literatures from this angle. It was his belief that the famous *Tirukkural* is a Buddhist work and its author, an untouchable poet. Essays in

Tamilan were published establishing Tamil classics like *manimekalai* and ethical works like *tirukkural* and *atticcuvati* as Buddhist works.

Thass' *Puttaratu Adhivedam* 1912, is his magnum opus, written to explain Buddhism to new converts. The book based on Tamil and Pali works is a standing testimony to his scholarship and erudition. It narrates Buddha's history and Buddhist religious doctrines. *Buddhist Doctrines – Question and Answers*, 1912, had been published several times. *Indirar Desa charithiram* 1931, narrates a new history that India came to be known as Bharat even before the advent of the Aryans and Buddhism was the religion of the rulers of this country. Avvaiyar and her *Atticcuti*, *konraiventan* and *vetri nanam* are interpreted in a new light. *Vivaka Villakkam* 1926, tells what the reformed marriage procedure was. Denial of rights to widows and unwanted marriage rituals are condemned. *Harichandran Lies* 1931, special *sangai thelivu*, *yathartha Brahmana* and *vesha Brahmana – vetanta* details, *Nandan History Trick* – all these contain Buddha's preaching in Tamil and pali. He has also written a book on logic in Tamil.

3.4 MODERN REVIVALISM OF BUDDHISM

Iyothee Thass's meeting with Olcott was a turning point not only in his life but also for the Tamil Dalit movement. In many ways, Thass was a forerunner of Dr B.R. Ambedkar. He led a delegation of prominent Dalits to Olcott and pleaded for his help in reestablishing Tamil Buddhism. With Olcott's help Thass visited Sri Lanka and got diksha' from Bikkhu Sumangala Nayake. On his return, he established the Sakya Buddhist Society in Chennai with branches in many places including Karnataka. The contemporary Tamil Dalit movement has rediscovered its Buddhist roots through Thass. Thass launched a weekly called *Tamilan* in 1907 and published it till his demise in 1914. Here, he devoted his energies in critiquing the Swarajya politics of the Congress. Thass was the driving force behind the establishment of several panchama schools in Chennai. He focused on education and the land issue. He interpreted Indian history in an entirely different light in the work *Indirar Desa Sarithiram* (History of India) which can be classified as subaltern history in a true sense.

Choice of Buddhism was to create a counter culture against revivalist tradition of the time. Indeed, it was a paradigm for critiquing the metaphysical frame work of traditional thinking. Buddhism was seen as a critique of oppressed caste hierarchy. In search for a specific identity, the subalterns tried to take recourse to Buddhism. In an era of awareness of liberty, equality and human dignity, Tamil Buddhist movement strove hard to give distinctive identity, to create collective consciousness of their oppressed state and to enable self-esteem. For Ambedkar Buddhism proposes a social reconstruction for alleviating suffering of the oppressed. Embracing Buddhism is not for its fighting nature, but as an ideological revolution, a counter culture and ethics. Speaking out the suffering and social injustice and raising against them for the liberation of the people. A cultural weapon for dalit struggle for identity. (Muthumohan 2007, 1086).

Tamil Buddhism remained a construct, conceptual framework, like that of 'Hindu' or 'Tamil Saiva' constructs. After Thass, there were no takers for this conceptual framework. Although Tamil Buddhism failed to become a strong mass movement, Thass' contribution is praiseworthy for he had powerfully and forcefully argued for constructing a consciousness for the subalterns. Iyothee Thass made strenuous efforts in constructing a collective consciousness for the subalterns as 'purva Buddhist' and as original Tamils. Certainly it initiates a lively discussion of

consciousness, individual or collective identity, as contested and constructed reality, not as a given or naturally emerging one. Giving the oppressed people a religious identity, he affirms that religion becomes an ideology, socially determined and as culturally constructed phenomenon. Having understood that religious symbols are influential and authoritative, he tried to create new worlds of symbols and their meaning, worldviews and ideologies. The construction of different worldview and religious identity happen in concrete living situations. In subaltern awareness it is the unjust, inhuman and oppressive caste structure that stimulates the aspiration for constructing distinctive identity. Necessity of self-assertion and self-determination is very much felt. For him, Emancipation is not in just socio-political field but in affirmation of the collective self.

Revivalism of Buddhism has played a vital role in emergence of Subaltern consciousness. There was always a connection between these, as Buddhism was taken as an adequate challenging tradition to the caste-ridden tradition. Consciousness of oppression and freedom from oppression was sought by having recourse to reviving Buddhism. As dominance was equated with Vedism, Buddhism was sought after for emancipation. As a counter movement, Buddhism was seen as the pointer, inspirer and action oriented philosophy.

3.5 SUBALTERN RELIGION

While critically analyzing the texts on God and soul, Iyothee Thass came up with a new discourse on God. The term God refers to those men and women, who through their own morally right conduct towards their fellow human beings and society have become immortalized in history and inspiration for subsequent generations. God is an ideal term and invitation to all similarly raise themselves morally to the status of the Divine. Veneration of these gods is neither out of fear nor for favor but a celebratory remembrance to strengthen one's own resolve to become like them. A righteous life taught by Buddha is religion for him. The three fundamental ethical teachings of Buddha are: Don't sin (*Kanma Bhaagai*); Do good (*Artha Bhaagai*); Purify your heart (*Gnana Bhaagai*). These fundamental teachings are further explicated in the four (*Bhedas*): *Aram*, *Porul*, *Inbam*, *Veedu*. Each *Bhaagai* has got eight deeper understandings which are called *upanidam*. Apart from three *Bhaagai*, the fourth one is called *Niruvaana Bhaagai* which emphasizes renunciation. He mentions about *Devanilai*, which means completely removing the evil desires and deeds in oneself, engulfed in virtues of compassion, love and forbearance and loving relationship with all creatures. Those people who have obtained the status of *Devanilai* are called *Devars*. The Buddha was the *Adidevan* and *Adinathan*. Brahminical religion introduced a hierarchical society in the form of caste system. It elevated Brahmins to the level of gods and divided the society into upper classes and lower classes and treated women as inferior groups.

3.6 RESTORING SUBALTERN IDENTITY AND PERSONHOOD

Thass' move to urge the Government to register the so-called untouchables as 'casteless Dravidians' in the first Census was a conscious attempt to identify oppressed people in Tamil Nadu to be the true descendents of the anti-Brahmin legacy. Necessity of self-assertion and self-determination is very much felt. For him, emancipation is not in just socio-political field but in affirmation of the collective self. His success in insisting on untouchables to register themselves as "casteless

Dravidians” instead of identifying themselves as Hindus, was indeed constructing an identity of the subalterns. Iyothee Thass is a case of Subaltern Historiography pointing to the significance of the everydayness in life and society, bringing to surface the concerns of the oppressed and initiating a process of building a new people. Thass reconstructs their identity by asserting that they were Dravida Buddhists, once high in social status but later termed as low castes. (Iyothee Thass, *Iyothee Thassar Sinthanaigal – Thoughts of Iyothee Thass (Tamil)*, Vol.I, 132) Subaltern history emerged in India with the interest in the close reading of the social text of India. Reading this text one wonders at the failure or non-start of a revolution in Indian society. The reason may be well linked caste-religion duo. The casteist identity was an invention of the elite applied on the subaltern to keep them relegated to the downside of society. (David Ludden 2001, 9.) It is interesting to note that Thass was convinced of a fact that south Indian Dravida Buddhist considered the invading Aryans as aliens and polluting their dwelling places. (Iyothee Thass, Vol.III, 128. Thass gives an account of a custom among the downtrodden, *parayars*, to purify the places polluted by Aryans, with cow dung and water.)

With his commitment to work at the grass roots level, with the real life of people is indeed a project of constructing community, with certain identity and restoring a collective personhood. If classical traditions aimed at individual liberation and the human being constructed in terms of individualism, Iyothee Thass projected liberation for the community, collective consciousness and *moksa* as communitarian. For him, self is never an individual, but rather collective, communitarian, interdependent, mutual correlated and mutually influential. If Classical Indian systems try to envision a liberation from this world, it is justifiable that Thass who tried to envision an utopian world of freedom and liberation tried to articulate that vision in terms of social liberation and emancipation of the oppressed. It is a reassertion of ‘*parayar* self’ from a world of bondage and oppression. He pleaded for giving a suitable name for the subalterns that would be unique and identifying them separately as a community. He even went to the extend of saying that Buddhists were the one who gave the term ‘Hindu’ to non-Buddhists, thus reclaiming the ‘*parayar* self.’

Contribution of Thass

“Consciousness of oppression” is an uneasy, disturbing consciousness. It is an urge, a will to change the so far held normative and structural social relations. As a praxis oriented consciousness of oppression in all socio-political, religious spheres, it is a strong aspiration to challenge and change the strong normative and structural social relations. The rise of consciousness of oppression is “process by which the different individuals and groups become conscious” The nationalist surge was seen as reassertion of the hierarchical ideology. While Dravidian movements and tamil saiva movement raised voice against brahminism, they did not touch the basic caste structure. But for Thass, shattering the caste structure is basic for giving an identity for the subalterns. To constructing an identity other than Brahmin/non-brahmin, Thass preferred Buddhism. (Aloysius 1996)

Against the practice of exclusion by the dominant caste groups, he promoted idea of inclusion and pleaded for democratization of traditional religion. He said: “We have heard that God and temples are common for all castes of the world. If that is so, why people of this community following Vaishnava or Saivaite tradition cannot be allowed to enter Vishnu or Shiv temples. By allowing them, won’t they prosper through mutual love and the religions also be strengthened?”

He tried to unmask the distorted meanings of religious beliefs and practices and reinterpreted and reconstructed the past in the course of self-affirmation and erected a new sacred universe. He highlighted the differences between Sankritic-Shasthraic Brahminism and Sramanism-Buddhism. Iyothethass, after epistemologically and historically deconstructed the current status of Dalits, he took ethical steps to regain their lost subjectivity.

Like Thass, P.Lakshmi Narasu, (1860-1934) has contributed to Neo Buddhism, as Engaged Buddhism, in the socio cultural situations. He was a writer and missionary who worked as a Professor of Physics and Chemistry of Madras Christian College. He published a well-known book 'The essence of Buddhism' in 1907, reprinted in 1912 with an introduction by Anagarika Dharmapala. The third printing came out in 1948 with a preface by B.R. Ambedkar himself showing the prestige of the book and the subject. His research and conclusions on Buddha emerged from His teachings on Non-violence and ahimsa. In Buddhist teachings, there is only compassion, morality, equality and causality, but not violence, domination, ritualism, caste, religion or God.

3.7 NARAYANA GURU (1856-1928)

Narayana Guru was a Dalit thinker, social reformer and a sage in the modern period of India. Born as a Ezhava which was a caste considered in between the upper and lowest strata in the caste hierarchy, he and his society suffered social injustice. He revolted against casteism and reformed the society by rejecting caste divisions in the society. He was fondly called as gurudeva. The Guru's philosophy is exemplified in his mystical writings that are truly interchanging warps and wefts of ethics, logic, aesthetics and metaphysics woven into masterpieces of silken rich poetry. The Guru's literary works are in Malayalam, Sanskrit, Tamil languages, and these works are of a conceptual and aesthetic quality at par with the upanishads.

He was instrumental in transforming the society in Kerala. He used the Advaita Vedanta as a tool for transforming the society. Guru's philosophy, which is fundamentally of Advaitic and non-dual wisdom in principles, further extended advaita concepts into practical modes of self-realisation through spiritual education, compassion and vision for peaceful co-existence of the human race, whilst promoting social equality and universal brotherhood. His philosophy of non-violence and ahimsa strongly denounced discrimination in the name of caste or religion, and emphasized focusing on education and private enterprise for the ongoing uplift of the quality of life. The Guru's philosophy emphasized the consistency between true existence of the "common reality" on Earth and one Divine behind the creation and sustenance of the universe, dismissing any concepts of illusory worlds or any mid-way "city on high".

At the time of its conception, Guru's philosophy was in many respects ahead of its time and focused on a futuristic world order that could be shaped from his philosophical connotations that are underlain with transcendental aesthetics and logic embodied in knowledge and pure reason. He provided the inspiration for a movement of social transformation in Kerala. Born in Ezhava community he was deeply interested in social reform, in the plight of the low castes. Basic philosophy of him is that of Advaita. Using the advaitic philosophy he drew out his plan for reform of religion and society. It is based on his triple principle of One Caste, One Religion and One God for man. All belong to same castes; the unity is due to the fact that all have been created alike; all are of the same species. There is no difference between man and man, there is no reason why they should not eat together and inter-marry.

Oneness of religion is based on the fact that all religions agree in spirit in the most essential teaching. All have a common goal; why should they fight for their faith. Religious divisions are due to the fact that each one tries to see things from his own angle and fail to see the basic unity that is there beyond all these views. The oneness of god is more an expression of advaitic monism than an expression of monotheism. This oneness has to be understood in the light of the general teaching of him. The teaching of Narayana Guru has continued to influence the mentality of people, in Kerala. (Wikipedia 2007)

3.8 RETTAMALAI SRINIVASAN (1860-1945)

Rettamalai Srinivasan was a Dalit activist and freedom fighter. He is one of the pioneers of the Dalit movement in India. He was born in a *Paraiyar* Dalit family. He was a brother-in-law of Iyothee Thass. He established and led the Paraiyar Mahajana Sabha in 1891 which later became the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha. He founded a Tamil newspaper called *Paraiyan* in 1893 with great difficulties in the initial days and later faced a case filed against it. In 1930, he represented the Dalits at the Second Round Table Conference in London along with Ambedkar. Along with Ambedkar and M C Rajah, he joined the board of the Servants of Untouchables Society established by Gandhi, from which all three of them withdrew. He established in 1939, with the support of Ambedkar, the Madras Province Scheduled Castes' Federation. His legacy is carried on today with Tamil Nadu political party called Viduthalai Siruthaigal. (Wikipedia 2011).

3.9 M.C. RAJAH (1883-1943)

Rajah was a Dalit politician, social activist born in a poor Dalit family. He was the leader of Dalit in the Justice party from which he quit in 1923 over the party's treatment of Dalit. He allied with Ambedkar and represented the Dalits at London Round Table Conference. He was the secretary of Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha and the founder member of the South Indian Liberal Federation. He was the first member of the Dalit community to be elected to the Madras legislative Council in 1920, as Justice Party candidate. In 1922, he passed a resolution demanding that the terms, *paraiya* and *panchama* be dropped from official usage and instead be substituted with *Adi-Dravida* and *Adi-Andhra*. When reservations for backward classes in government jobs were introduced Rajah led a delegation of Dalits to press their demand for inclusion. Justice Party government did not respond and riots broke out, owing to which he quit the party. He created and became the president of the All India Depressed Castes Association. He made a pact with B.S. Moonje of Indian National Congress to offer a reserved seats to Scheduled Castes, a demand prompted Ambedkar to make an official demand for separate electorates on an all-India basis. (Wikipedia 2011)

3.10 LET US SUM UP

Although subaltern movements have been termed as protest and rebellious ones, they were truly transformatory in nature, at least for the subalterns. They were actually responses to the changing contemporary scenario. Mahatma Phule's inspiration and reform work towards Dalit emancipation are commendable. Using the advaitic philosophy he drew out his plan for reform of religion and society. It is based on his triple principle of one caste, one religion and one God for all. Iyothee Thass being inspired by Buddhism, challenged the dominant brahminical thinking. He critically evaluated the non-brahminical movements and their parochial

interests of protecting the interests of backward castes and ignoring the plight of the Untouchable people. He pointed out that in non-brahminical movements there were caste- arrogance, religious-arrogance, knowledge-arrogance and money-arrogance. More than boycotting foreign goods renouncing caste-arrogance was important for him. Rettalmalai Srinivasan and M.C. Rajah worked with and took the ideology and movement of Thass further. Buddhist revival project of Thass for the emancipation of Dalits became a great force and popular with Ambedkar's *Navyayana* – Neo-Buddhism.

3.11 KEY WORDS

<i>Navyayana</i>	: Revival of Buddhism for Dalit emancipation
<i>Adi-Dravida</i>	: Iyothee Thass brought in the consciousness of Dalits that they were original inhabitants of the land and they were Buddhist, in terms of anti-brahmanism.

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