

IYOTHI DOSS AND HIS IDEOLOGY TO THE POLITICAL IDENTITY OF SUBALTERN PEOPLE

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Abstract : The late 19th and 20th Centuries witnessed the rise of several leaders who took up the cause of the Scheduled Castes and worked for their elevation, with fervor and devotion. These leaders came from all walks of life and from all castes and creeds. They led exemplary lives and practiced what they preached. They all pleaded for more educational facilities and better living conditions for the Subaltern People. They aimed at their elevation, without preaching hatred of any community. They tried to improve their conditions by exhorting the scheduled caste to follow cleanliness, good habits and obtain education and by trying to break down the social barriers by propagating and educating the masses about the inhumanity of untouchability. The efforts of these individual leaders went a long way in improving the condition and status of the depressed classes. The Tamil Subaltern leader, Iyodhi Doss, not only founded his own Buddhist movement but he also identified Dalits with Buddhists by arguing that the Tamil Paraiyas were not only Buddhists but also descendents of the Buddha's own clan, the Sakyas. By the 1920s, this identification with early Buddhists was an underlying theme among many Dalit movements, especially in south India, and it was seen in the context of theories about Aryan conquest of an equalitarian, non-Aryan indigenous society. In this interpretation acceptance of Buddhism by Dalits (and in some versions, by non-Brahmans as well) would not really be 'conversion' to a new religion, but liberation and a return to their original identity.

I. IYOTHI DOSS AND HIS IDEOLOGY TO THE POLITICAL IDENTITY OF SUBALTERN PEOPLE

The late 19th and 20th Centuries witnessed the rise of several leaders who took up the cause of the Scheduled Castes and worked for their elevation, with fervor and devotion. These leaders came from all walks of life and from all castes and creeds. They led exemplary lives and practiced what they preached. They all pleaded for more educational facilities and better living conditions for the Subaltern People. They aimed at their elevation, without preaching hatred of any community. They tried to improve their conditions by exhorting the scheduled caste to follow cleanliness, good habits and obtain education and by trying to break down the social barriers by propagating and educating the masses about the inhumanity of untouchability. The efforts of these individual leaders went a long way in improving the condition and status of the depressed classes.¹

In Colonial India, the print media facilitated the rise of multiple, distinctive vernacular publics. Typically associated with urbanization and middle class formation, this new public sphere was given material form through the consumption and circulation of print media and characterized by vigorous debate over social ideology and religious-cultural practices. Studies examining the roots of nationalist mobilization, have argued that these colonial publics, politicized daily life even as they hardened cleavages along fault lines of gender, caste and religious identity.²

II. POLITICS OF DALIT IDENTITY

Designation of a community is a political act which involved the social process of inclusion and exclusion of a community and attaching privileges, rights and disabilities within a framework of an ideology. In India, Manudharma, as a caste ideology, designated communities and placed them in a structured caste hierarchy and deprived Depressed Class of their wealth and social esteem. They have been challenging their designators from the days of Rig Veda. Dalits have been winning their battle against designator and gaining in the form of reservation benefits from the days of British Rule in India.³

Depressed Class are aborigines of India, designated by the Aryans as Dasa and Chandala in the political interests of Aryans and deprived Dalits of their land and human status. Rig veda, upanishads, Manusmriti and Mahabharatha gave a degraded picture of Dalits. It is a fact, that Purushsuktha of Rig veda, which was composed around 1500-1000 B.C, provides evidence to the fact that there existed five castes, that is, brahmins, Kshatriya, Vyshyas and Sudras, including Dasyu.⁴

Rig vedic narration of tribal wars between Dalits and Aryans, portrays that Dalits were subjugated by Aryans when the former were at primitive stage of society. All Brahminic writers of later Vedic Period continued their sayings and writings in defense of politics, behind the designation of Chandalas by Aryans. Upanishds, composed around 800-600 B.C., created hatred against Dalits, equating them with dogs and stated that Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vyshyas are born in a pleasant womb while Chandalas are born in a stinking womb. Manusmriti, which was composed around A.D. 1700, propagated that Chandalas(Dalits) were off springs of a Sudra male and a Brahmin female. The stories of Mahabharatha, written at a later period, explain the politics behind designation of Dalits in India.⁵

The story of Karthama Prajapathi, the father of Arundhati, the grandfather of aborigine King, Jambavantha, which was referred to in Mahabharatha, adequately explains the politics behind the designation of Chandala identity to aborigine(Dalits) Tribes of Ancient India.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar viewed that the war between settled(Dalits) tribes and nomadic tribes(Aryans) in the primitive stage of their development, was nothing but a war for economic benefits and existence. "The purpose of Aryan was against Dalits, according to Dr. B.R Ambedkar, was (1) stealing the cattle, (2) stealing women and (3) stealthily grazing of cattle in the pastures, belonging to other tribes.⁶

Caste ideology which drove Karthama Prajapathi out of Dakshinapatha, and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's analysis of war between settled tribes (Dalits) and nomadic (Aryans) tribes, reveal the purpose of Aryan invasion on Dalits and labeling of Dalits as Chandalas in Ancient India. They were (i) Alienating the lands of Dalits, (ii) Subjugating of Dalit women, (iii) excluding of Dalit from entering into marriage contact with Aryans, (iv) Depriving Dalits of their human esteem, (v) Attaching the stigma of untouchability of Dalits and (vi) excommunicating of Dalits from village life and culture.

Before Independence, the British identified Untouchables as a specific social category, as evident from the creation of an administrative notation called depressed classes, that coincided more or less with them and that was used in the Census of 1921 for the first time. In the 1931 Census, the most detailed one till now, so far as castes were concerned, the criteria defining Depressed Classes had much to do with ritual impurity (access to wells, schools, temples are taken into account, for instance). As these dimensions derived from the rationale of the caste system, it was not surprising that the Depressed Classes were rechristened Scheduled Castes in the Government of India Act (1935).⁷

III. Iyodhi Doss and Politics

Iyodhi Doss's 'The Buddha and His teachings' was primarily embodied within Tamil Dravidian Traditions, contesting the conservative Vedic perspective of the Indian cultural and historical traditions. It is to be reconstructed on the main force of socio-cultural rationality.⁸ Iyodhi Doss pursued a relentless and sustained campaign against swadeshi reforms while writing in his *Oru Paisa Thamizhan*. He viewed that there did exist a casteist edge to swadeshi pronouncements.

He was highly critical of Congress-Nationalists and their reform policy. He did not like their native self-government and found the British more acceptable than the Brahmans. He observed that only with the arrival of the British, the depressed class had been brought to a realization of their own humanity since it was the British who treated him like a human being. He was sure that Congress was a party of Brahmanas who were intentionally perpetuating caste inequalities and prejudices.⁹ The party men were the power mongers, fighting against themselves. In 1906, the party was broken into two, between Moderates and Extremists. Such self-seekers would not make a Pariah the Governor of a State or an Army Commander. There was an inborn enmity between Paraiyahs and Brahmans. It could be solved only through Buddha Dharma. Further, Iyodhi Doss observed that as a result of the Nationalists, boycott of foreign goods, especially the prices of cloth went up and caused hardship to the poor. He never considered that white man was ever the savior of the Paraiyahs or Christianity as their asylum. Even after their conversion, they were called Pariah-Christians. There was also the same degradation. Hence he requested his fellowmen to believe the modernized Caste Hindus for their liberalism and egalitarian outlook. But his basic belief was that the fundamental transformation in Pariah life and consciousness had been effected only by of colonial rule and Western learning.¹⁰

Iyodhi Doss a re-reading of history and literature reflected a concern and anxiety over the Semitic import of the term, 'Paraiyah'. He vehemently condemned the nationalist social reformers for addressing depressed classes as the Paraiyahs and Chandalas. He observed that for him and his people, the advent of the White Man ushered in the liberation of subaltern class because the British brought with them a learning that was available to all and caste-indifferent.¹¹

As soon as the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha was organized in 1891, education of the depressed classes seemed to have been one of the principal aims of the Sabha. The British Government in Madras had been undertaking some ameliorative measures for this class of people. It was in 1893, that the Government of Madras had announced the need of the depressed class children to study on par with other Caste Hindus.¹²

He strongly articulated the idea of Communal Reservation, which later became the political agenda of the Non-Brahmin Movement. He strongly supported reservation for Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Anglo Indians and Europeans in Panchayats Municipality, Education, police and so on. The idea of Communal Reservation was articulated in 1885.¹³

It was observed that a village magistrate can confine a man of the depressed classes any time that he likes and he went on to say that even such things as "laziness in tending the cattle shed, disobedience to the order of the landowner, can bring the depressed brother the punishment of confinement in the stocks". In 1913, the Fourth Depressed Classes Conference, held at Mayavaram, had resolved to entreat the Government to remove this obnoxious practice. Narasimha Iyer, acting on this resolution, had gone on to introduce a Bill,¹⁴ calling for the abolition of the use of stocks as punishment.

According to Iyodhi Doss, "the Brahmans, as in the days of old, continued to remain exclusive and quarrel over their caste symbols, their subsets, their distinctive modes of living and eating. While they did not consider it an embarrassment to travel, dine and interact with peoples of other races and nations, they persisted in their semantic and symbolic quibbles over questions of caste identity, if only to distinguish themselves constantly and systematically from their fellow men and women".

Nearly a decade later, in his welcome address to the First Non-Brahmin Confederation, held at Madras in December 1917,¹⁵ the agaraya Chetty, also drew attention to the brahmans proclivity to remain exclusive and constitute an oligarchy which historically had successfully resisted all revolts against it.

More than 2400 years ago, the Buddhist Reformation sought to unify an classes but the influence of varnashrama dharma was too strong. Ramanuja, though a Brahmin, tried to mitigate the rigours of the social and religious tyranny of the

Brahmin priesthood and succeeded partially.¹⁶ Basavaiaya made a similar attempt which was attended with a similar result. Thus every successive attempt, to put down the brahminical tyranny, ended in failure with the result that they elaborated the present system of untouchableness and pollution.

Such awareness of the dominance, that held them in thrall and of a hegemony, which willed them to lifelong humiliation, was widely present amongst literate Non-Brahmins in the early years of our Century and articulated by them at opportune moments. This awareness was most evident in articles written for vernacular weeklies such as *Tamizhan* and usually expressed itself at several levels: as anti-Brahminism and anti-casteism; as anti-Aryan and anti-Sanskrit or alternately, as pro-Tamil and pro-Dravidian.¹⁷

In striking contrast to the privileged Brahmins were the segregated Panchamas who were called untouchables. They constituted 15% of the population. They established parallel societies, the members having their own roads, wells, their own shops, hotels, barbers and washer man, deities and priests, their own burial grounds from which all Caste Hindus kept away. This elaborate system of apartheid segregated the members of the Panchama Society and kept them at the greatest physical, cultural and economic distance from the Caste Hindus.¹⁸

Originally, they were casteless but later they formed their own castes. They did not intermarry but were collectively known as the depressed classes and the Harijans. The *Adi Dravida Mahajana Sabha*, which advocated the cause of untouchable castes, was founded in 1892 and on many occasions, the Sabha represented to the Government the grievances of the Pariahs. In the 1921 Census, 15,025 retained their caste name as *Adi Ddravida*. On repeated petitioning to the Government, it recognised the new name by an order issued which directed that the term *Adi-Dravida* should be recognised in Tamil Districts and *Adi Andhra* in Telugu Districts in the place of the word, Panchama or Pariahs or similar names.¹⁹ The cause for the change may be due to the feeling of respectability that the change in name gave them.

Iyodhi Dossar challenged the very notion of the 'depressed classes' and demanded to know in what sense the dalit-subalterns were more depressed than the Brahminised castes of his day, except for the fact that the latter willfully and systematically suppressed the former. He found the Brahminised, mentally, morally and culturally, more depressed and even demented as they were clinging on to anachronistic beliefs and obscurantist practices. In comparison to them, he found the missionaries and even the Colonial Government, were well meaning in their ameliorative efforts. Iyodhi Dossar elaborated that since it was through their inhuman caste/varna scheme and spirit that the dalit-subalterns were depressed and the greatest help and support they could render now, was to put an end to the devious system and thus cease to be an obstacle in the way of freedom and liberty. He, however, could recognise, appreciate and cooperate with several 'upper' caste individuals who showed signs of renouncing caste in public life. Emergence in subjectivity was not a simple and non-reflexive activity for Iyodhi Dossar and he relentlessly, exposed hypocrisy whenever he confronted it in the public sphere, whether sacred or secular.²⁰

IV. Ideology of Iyodhi Doss

This developing 'Hindu' ideology was contested by a vigorous anti-caste movement that emerged in the 19th and 20th Centuries, beginning with Jothirao Phule in Maharashtra and Iyodhi Doss in Tamil Nadu. The single most consciously designed, consistently worked out, thoroughly debated and well-publicized case of the dalit-subaltern collective emergence, in religio-cultural subjectivity in modern India was, of course, the Movement led by Ambedkar in 1956.²¹

The Tamil Subaltern leader, Iyodhi Doss, not only founded his own Buddhist movement but he also identified Dalits with Buddhists by arguing that the Tamil Paraiyas were not only Buddhists but also descendents of the Buddha's own clan, the Sakyas. By the 1920s, this identification with early Buddhists was an underlying theme among many Dalit movements, especially in south India, and it was seen in the context of theories about Aryan conquest of an equalitarian, non-Aryan indigenous society.²² In this interpretation acceptance of Buddhism by Dalits (and in some versions, by non-Brahmans as well) would not really be 'conversion' to a new religion, but liberation and a return to their original identity.

In brief, the modern Tamil Buddhism became a reality with the formation of Sakya (and later South Indian) Buddhist Society in 1898, under the charismatic leadership of Iyodhi Dossar, with the support and encouragement of Colonel Olcott of the Theosophical Society. The Movement did not take much time to capture the imagination of the dalit-subaltern communities in the northern Chinglepet, Madras, Arcot, Kolar, Bangalore and Hubli Bangalore Districts of the Madras Presidency and also to spread overseas to Burma, Sri Lanka, Fiji, Malaysia and South Africa where the subaltern Tamils had migrated as labourers.²³ The Movement, though basically a response of the dalit-subaltern communities to the colonial contradictions, sought to embrace, in the typical Buddhist fashion, the entire society.

Subaltern politics, which had lost much of its dynamism prior to 1947, became divided along lines of personalities, ideologies and political strategies, after independence. The Subaltern leaders in the post 1947 period, preferred to align themselves with the more dominant political streams within the Province as well as the Nation. The political behavior of the Subaltern leaders brought several interesting issues to the forefront. It, thus, becomes imperative to understand whether the Brahman-Bourgeois Congress, which had successfully appropriated 'scheduled caste politics during the last phase of colonial rule, was mainly responsible for the decline or *Adi Dravida* politics in Tamil Nadu. It also needs to be explored as to whether the lack of colonial patronage made this decline an irreversible moment in history.²⁴

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