

BOOK REVIEW

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TITLE: TAMIL BUDDHISM AND BRAHMINISM IN MODERN INDIA

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This book explores Tamil Buddhism in modern India, focusing on its emergence as a response to caste-based oppression during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Central to this movement was Pandit Iyothee Thass(1845-1914 CE), a pioneering intellectual who reinterpreted India's Buddhist past to challenge brahminical dominance. Thass reasoned that it was because many Indians followed Buddhist cultural and material traditions in ancient times, they were oppressed as untouchables and lower caste by self-privileging-caste groups, such as brahmins. Thus, Thass challenged brahminism/ casteism in India by re-constructing and mobilizing a reading public about the casteless Buddhist history of Indians who were prone to caste oppression. His writings, petitions, and archives reveal the castelessness of Tamil Buddhists and their commitment for a radical political transformation in modern India. Key aspects of the Tamil Buddhist movement include public mobilization for caste-free societies, self-representation of oppressed communities, economic redistribution through affirmative action and contemporary reparations, and a feminist critique of caste and patriarchy. Through interdisciplinary methods from critical caste studies, this monograph uncovers the intellectual history of Tamil Buddhism and its call for vernacular emancipation. It highlights how indigenous, Tamil/ Indian communities used Buddhist foundations to resist caste and envision a modern, casteless future.

Having comprising of seven chapters followed by epilogue and a detailed bibliography, the book is divided into two parts. Part I, 'Counter-Hegemony Poiesis' examines how the Tamil Buddhists developed critical caste narratives among the Tamil-reading public. They opposed caste-imposing categorization and victimization under brahminical scriptural, cultural, and political practices in late colonial India. It also investigates in what ways they reconstructed their own Buddhist memory and history. The First chapter begins with an analysis of the Tamil Buddhists' sympathetic critique of the history of Brahmin-male power and brahminical canonization as it manifested in texts, gurus, and modern organization in South Asia. Chapter Two delineates how those who were discriminated against as lower

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castes and untouchables began to question and reject the caste identities imposed on them in various brahminical and colonial registers. Chapter Three unravels the significance of memory among the indigenous Indians in caste margins. It demonstrates how those who were classified by casteist and colonial authorities as *Paraiyars* affirmed themselves as Tamil Buddhists and succeeded in historicizing a casteless Buddhist past. Chapter four shows that those who were oppressed by caste in the Tamil-speaking regions upheld their own casteless and anti-caste vernacular regional histories, historical figures, and collective commemorations that remember them into present casteless Tamil society. It analyses how and in what ways Tamil Buddhist cosmopolitanism demonstrated a local and global openness that challenged the very structure of caste.

Part II of the book, 'Modes of Casteless Praxis', focuses on Tamil Buddhist efforts to change their social and material conditions by opposing the brahminical propaganda of patriarchal casteism and casteist enrichment of wealth via the colonial offices and policies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chapter Five, therefore, examines the Tamil Buddhist critique of brahminical nationalism that diabolically indulged in caste and gender inequalities. It argues that the Tamil Buddhist criticism of gender disparities and violence against girls and women was far more unequivocally anti-caste, unlike some of the pioneering feminist discourses of the time, leading to the emergence of critical caste feminism in modern India. Chapter Six analyses the Tamil Buddhist critique against the casteism of the Indian National Congress. It shows how the caste-oppressed Indians were alienated by the Indian national movement's caste nationalism within the few years of its emergence. Nonetheless, the Tamil Buddhists exposed the minority Congress brahmins who colluded with the colonialists to perpetuate their exclusionary enrichment and entrenchment against a large majority of Indians. The final chapter, Chapter Seven, shows that the Tamil Buddhists did not place all their faith either among the casteist nationalists or in the colonial institutions to transform their economic and social conditions. Instead, they attempted to autonomously establish their own inclusive institutions by mobilizing local and global Tamil Buddhists. Thus, the book ends with an epilogue arguing that decasteization of civil society, state, and academy has largely constrained. This may be attributed to the obstructive academic categories, methodologies and gatekeeping of caste-oppressed and non-brahmin scholars in India and beyond. It is high time that South Asian humanities and social sciences, as well as natural sciences, need to become inclusive and equitable, in contrast to their anti-diversity and institutionalized caste segregation now. This is possible only by learning from humanism of Indians, such as the Tamil Buddhists, who have long resisted brahminism/casteism.

Registering the complex voices of critical caste Indian is the primary reason for this book. Its contents depend on and speak to the sources and arguments of Indians in caste margins to emphasize how the reading is more important. But for reading, speaking, telling, showing, and writing of those who have struggled for long, challenging caste in India, this book would never have found its relevance. They call for the attention of academic and non-academic community. Undoubtedly, despite all its limitations, this book does justice to such voices. This book is recommended for those who believe in egalitarian society.