

## REVIVAL OF TAMIL BUDDHISM: A HISTORICAL STUDY

\*MA.VELUSAMY \*\*V.THIRUVENI

\*Assistant Professor of Social Work.DDE, Alagappa UniversityKaraikudi  
\*\* Assistant Professor of Tamil .DDE, Alagappa UniversityKaraikudi

Buddhism has to-day grown into a great religion of the world with a large following of its own. As Buddhism spread, it wielded a great influence all over India. Protest against caste system, determination to break the barriers dividing one section from the other and establishing equality among all sections of the people, involving the masses in preaching the religion and as a means of appealing to the masses through the simple languages they understand were the salient features that enabled spread of Buddhism. Because of its concern over the social question of the day, Buddhism became a popular movement and the oppressed class people in India found solace and comfort in Buddhism. This paper aims to trace the history of the Tamil Buddhist Religious Movement in Tamil Nadu.

**Key Words : Buddhism, Tamil Buddhism, Religious Movement**

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Buddhism was there in Tamil Nadu even during the Sangam age. It saw its golden age during A.D. 400-700. The genesis of the Bhakthi Movement in the 6th century and Adi Sankara's Vedanta Movement led to the collapse of Jainism and Buddhism. Sans Manimekalai, almost all of the Buddhist literary works were destroyed and the sublime principles of

Buddhism got merged with Hinduism. Mylai S. Venkatasami, Dr. Vasudeva Rao, Dr. S. N. Kanda samy and of late Dr. Shu Hikosaka have traced the long history of Buddhism and its literature in Tamil Nadu. Dr. Shu Hikosaka has desired that a study to examine the impact of Buddhism after its decline on Tamil culture and literature shall be purposive and fruitful<sup>1</sup> So far no one has undertaken any serious study in this direction or to trace out the history of the movement to the revival of Tamil Buddhism in Tamil Nadu during this century.

According to Bhikku Sangharakshita the revival of the modern Buddhist Movement in India began about a hundred years ago with Mahaviraswami, a veteran of Indian Mutiny who after receiving higher ordination in Burma settled at Kusinagara. Buddhist revival in India began as an organised movement in 1891, when Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) founded the Maha Bhodhi Society. He was one of the pioneers that drew the attention of the authorities concerned towards the historic importance of the ancient Buddhist sites that were in isolation. He had renounced the earth and home at the age of 18 and the maiden

speech at the parliament of religion held in Chicago in 1893 was his personal introduction to the Western World and Far East.<sup>2</sup> He succeeded in gathering round him a number of distinguished people who were desirous of working for the cause of Buddhism. However the importance of Buddhism for the history of Indian religion and culture became fairly general among the educated classes, from them percolating down here and there among the masses.<sup>3</sup> As rightly pointed by Sangharakshita the most decisive and far-reaching event of modern times occurred when late Dr. B. R. Ambedkar embraced Buddhism at Nagpur on 14th October, 1956 along with half a million followers. To-day Buddhism is a household word and became once more the living hope of millions.

Pandit Ayothi Doss's Buddhist Revival Movement in Tamil Nadu predates Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Neo-Buddhist Movement in Maharashtra and his service in this direction and the publication of Tamil Books and periodicals of his movement deserve elaborate research and investigation. It is heartening to note that Mr. Vijayakumar, Journalist living in Bangalore has attempted to bring to light the Tamil Buddhist Revival Movement in his project paper on Neo-Buddhist Interpretation of Buddhist History in India.<sup>4</sup> The aim of the present paper is restricted to a historical survey

of Tamil Buddhism that started at the end of the nineteenth century in Madras, particularly with reference to the efforts of Pandit K. Ayothi Doss in reviving Tamil Buddhism and the impact of such efforts in the emergence of the Neo-Buddhist movement in Tamil Nadu and also to the efforts initiated by Baba Saheb Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the accredited leader of the 'untouchables' in India, to revive Buddhism.

Col. Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907) deserves the honour of having sown the seeds of Buddhist Revivalism in Madras. Later on, following his footsteps Pandit K. Ayothi Doss (1845-1914) and Prof. P. Lakshminarasu (1860-1934) nurtured it. It may be emphatically said that Pandit Ayothi Doss after receiving inspiration and help from Madame H. P. Blavatsky and Col. H. S. Olcott and through them from Ven. Dharmapala made the Buddhist Revivalism particularly the Tamil Buddhism the people's movement in the then composite Madras State.

Earlier the coming of the founders of the Theosophical Movement to India had paved the way for the revival of Buddhism. The Buddhist Priest Mohothiwatte Gunananda the high priest of the Buddhist Temple at Kotahena in Colombo joined the Theosophical Society in 1877. He was a brilliant orator and he opposed the Christian Missionaries who had greatly enfeebled the spiritual virility of Buddhism.<sup>5</sup>

In 1873 he had a great debate with the Wesleyan Minister David Silva in Panatura, Ceylon. The study of this debate had already influenced Col. H. S. Olcott and Madame H. P. Blavatsky to take a decision to go to Ceylon to study Buddhism.<sup>6</sup>

On the invitation of Gunananda and another equally famous High Priest in Ceylon, H. Sumangala, the Principal of the Vidyodaya College for Buddhist Priests, H. P. Blavatsky, Col. H. S. Olcott, Damodhar K. Malvalankar, E. Winbridge, S. J. Padshah, Mr. and Mrs. Panachand Anandaji and others left Bombay and reached Ceylon in May 1880. On their arrival in Ceylon, they dedicated themselves whole heartedly to the cause of reviving the waning spirit of Buddhism and formally Madame H. P. Blavatsky and Col. Olcott became Buddhists by reciting the five precepts after the High Priest A. Dhammarama at Vijayananda Temple in Galle, Ceylon.

In 1881 Col. Olcott put together the simple teachings of Buddhism in a Buddhist catechism in English and other Languages and he organised Buddhist Schools throughout Ceylon. In spite of bitter attacks by the Christian Missionaries the Buddhist Revivalism progressed steadily and it blossomed into a powerful Buddhist Educational Movement. Col. Olcott carried on his Buddhist Missionary work

as a private individual and not in his official capacity as the president of the Theosophical Society. Col. Olcott made a tour of Japan in 1888 and Australia in 1891. His visit to Japan was a remarkable success and he received welcome from all sects of Buddhism in Japan. After elaborate consultation, he drew up a statement of the Principles of Buddhism which were acceptable to such divergent forms as existed in Ceylon and Japan.<sup>7</sup>

In the year 1884, Col. Olcott along with Madame H.P. Blavatsky and Anagarika Dharmapala came to Adyar, Madras and started his liberation work for the Depressed classes. So he started his 'Olcott Panchama Free Schools' in Madras City. He considered education to be the only evident panacea for all the social disorders<sup>8</sup>.

In the year 1896 Pandit K. Ayothi Doss with his followers met Col. Olcott and requested him to help them to revive Buddhism and to build for them a temple where they could worship according to their ancestral rules. In 1898 Col. Olcott took Pandit Ayothi Doss and P. Krishnasamiar a teacher of Olcott Panchama Free School to Ceylon and there they became Buddhists.<sup>9</sup> In the same year Pandit Ayothi Doss started the South India Sakya Buddhist Association at Royapettah, Madras. Later the name was changed to South India Buddhist

Association. Branches of the Association sprang up in three other places in Madras.

Pandit Ayothi Doss, a Tamil Scholar, Native Doctor and one of the early leaders of the untouchables in Tamil Nadu is known by a lengthy name, 'Tondai Mandala Valla Kalathi Deiva Pulamai, Vaidya Simha, Sangai, Kaviraja Pandit K, Ayothi Dassa Dhamma Nayaka'. Kandaswamy was his father's name and it seems that he has added his teacher Ayothi Doss's name to express his gratitude and in course of time he came to be known as K. Ayothi Doss Pandithar<sup>10</sup>.

At a time when there were no facilities and opportunities and when there was opposition from several directions and quarters, it was he who set his face against them and 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 in this angle. It was his belief that the famous Thirukural is a Buddhist work and its author an untouchable. He interpreted the title as 'Thirikural'<sup>11</sup> Pandit Ayoti Doss founded a printing press called 'Gowthama Printing Press' in Madras, and published books and pamphlets that expatiate upon the Buddhism. In the weekly 'Oat Paise Tamizhan' which was later captioned 'Tamizhan' (1907 -1914) published by him carried essays in puristic Tamil. He wrote

stupendous articles and they were later published in book form by the Kolar Gold Fields Buddhist Associations. Pandit Ayothi Doss's 'Buddha's Adhivedam' is his magnum opus. It was written to explain Buddhism to new converts. The book based on Tamil and Pali works is a standing testimony to his scholarship and erudition. Pandit Ayothi Doss has written a book on logic also in Tamil.

The weekly 'Tamizhan' ran for 14 years from Madras and afterwards upto 1935 from Kolar Gold Fields. It maintained a high literary standard that kept the people informed of all that was happening in the country. There were extracts from 'London Times', the incidents of atrocities on oppressed class people, the Congress Politics etc. Essays were published establishing Tamil Classics like Manimekalai and ethical works like Thirukkural and Athichuvadi as Buddhist works.<sup>12</sup>

Due to the influence of Buddhist Association of Mad ras many became the followers of Buddhism. Pandit Ayothi Doss appealed to the British Government that there was no link between the Saivites or Vaishnavites and Buddhists and that the Buddhists should be classified as belonging to separate religion in 1911 census. Accordingly they were classified as a separate religion and separate funeral ghats were assigned to them. The 1911 - 1921 census reports established that

the Buddhist population increased.<sup>13</sup>

The speeches made in the South Indian Sakya Buddhist Association, Royapettah founded by Pandit Ayothi Doss and Mahabodhi Society near Ice House in Madras founded by M. Singaravelu produced hostile reaction in theist circles. News spread that in Royapettah Sangam, Alwars of Vaishnavism and Nayanmars of Saivism and Jesus Christ were debunked in order to refute Buddhism. Thiru. V. Kalyanasundaranar (Thiru. Vi. Ka.) and his friends who were in Kadiravelu Pillai's fold went to the Buddhist sangam meetings and caused disturbances. K. Vadivelu Chettiar and Vidvan Chennakesavelu Naidu also participated in these hostile uproar. In course of time Thiru. Vi. Ka. changed his mind after listening to the scientific expositions of Buddhists and after reading the books of Col. Olcott, Jinarajadasa and Bhikku Dharnapala. Finally he himself began to speak about 'Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha' and on 'Buddhism in Tamil Literature'. Later it was published in book form.<sup>14</sup>

### **Prof. P. Lakshmi Narasu**

Prof. P. Lakshmi Narasu, M. Singaravelu, Pandit G. Appaduraiar, A.P. Periaswami Pulavar and E.N. Ayakkanu Pulavar were close associates of Pandit Ayothi Doss and all of them were eminent Scholars and authors of Buddhist books. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar praised Prof. Lakshminarasu as a prodigy of the

last century. Prof. Narasu was a leading Buddhist of Madras and ever since his conversion to Buddhism he had been rendering very valuable service to the cause of Dhamma in South India.<sup>15</sup>

He conducted classes for the new converts to help them understand the Buddhist Tenets. He had convened a number of Buddhist conferences and spread Buddhism among untouchables. During Nineteen thirties he had associated himself with Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy's Rationalist Movement. In his preface hailing Prof. Narasu's book, 'Essence of Buddhism' as the best book on Buddhism 'that has appeared so far' Dr. B R. Ambedkar has said:

“Prof. Narasu was a Social Reformer. He fought caste to the best of his ability and raised a standard of Revolt against its tyranny in Hinduism, so early as in the nine-ties of the 18th century. He was a great admirer of Buddhism and gave courses of lectures on the subject week in and week out... Professor's one sin was social reform and in Buddhism he found his solace”<sup>16</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar took the trouble of bringing out the third edition of this book. In his preface he stated that he intended to deal with some of the criticisms which had been leveled against the teachings of Buddha by his adversaries-past and present, by writing a book.

After four years he wrote the 'Gospel of the Buddha' and sent it to international Buddhist Scholars to elicit their opinion, then he published 'Buddha and his Dhamma' which he regarded as his 'magnum opus'. Prof. Narasu's works were also a reason behind Dr. Ambedkar's opinion that the Depressed classes of India should leave Hinduism and embrace Buddhism.

Prof. Narasu's 'Essence of Buddhism' was published in 1907 with a preface from Anagarika Dharmapala. His book 'What is Buddhism' saw 14 editions in Japanese besides being translated in German and Slovak languages. In addition to these books Prof. Narasu wrote 'A study of Caste' and 'Buddhism and Hindu Religion' in Tamil. When Dr. Ambedkar visited Madras in 1954, he collected the manuscript of Prof. Narasu's 'The Religion of the Modern Buddhist' and it is yet to be published.<sup>17</sup>

With the first Buddhist conference held in Madras in 1917, it was resolved to submit a memorandum to the Montague-Chemsford team demanding political rights to the Adi Dravidas, the Buddhist Movement turned political. Representatives from Mysore, Secunderabad, Tamil Nadu, Colombo and Rangoon took part in this conference. Prof. Lakshmi Narasu presided over the conference.<sup>18</sup>

The Second the fourth and the fifth conferences

were held at Bangalore (1920), Kolar Gold Fields (1932)<sup>19</sup> and Vellore (1952) respectively. The meetings held at North Arcot District, Bangalore and Kolar Gold Fields where the Buddhist principles were explained turned into Rationalist Propaganda and attained as tatus of social and political speeches.

### **K.G.F. Buddhist Associations:**

The Mysore Gazetteer 1927 revealed the increase in Buddhist population in the erstwhile. Mysore State, now Karnataka.

"Buddhism claimed in 1921 as adherents 1319 persons as against 5 in 1891, 10 in 1901 and 622 in 1911. The increase is stated to be due to the activities of a Buddhist Mission which has been working for some time in the Civil and Military Station, Bangalore. The figure for 1921 shows that it is not dormant"<sup>20</sup>

The increase in the Buddhist population was possible due to the efforts of a band of selfless social workers who carried the message of Buddha to Kolar Gold Fields, the mining town in Karnataka and Bangalore. Particularly Kolar Gold Fields was a centre of Buddhist Scholarship and a very important centre of Buddhism in Karnataka for over the earlier half of this century. As stated by Vijayakumar this enviable missionary zeal to spread the gospel of Buddha and to awaken the depressed classes

from their slavery needs study of social scientists.<sup>21</sup>

In Kolar Gold Fields a relative of Pandit Ayothi Doss, M. Y. Murugesar started a branch of the South India Sakya Buddhist Association at Marikuppam in 1907. In the beginning M. Y. Murugesar was an ordinary employee, then he rose to the position of an Assistant Pay Roll Officer and after that he became a Mines contractor. He built a big hall for the association A. P. Periyaswami Pulavar, M. Y. Murugesar and C. Guruswamiar went to Madras and obtained Panchasheel. These along with Pandithamani G. Appaduraiar and E. N. Iyakkannu Pulavar assisted in the growth of this society. As a result of their work another Buddhist society was established at Champion Reefs Mines at K.G.F. in 1916. These societies functioned well in Kolar Gold Fields for over fifty years. During the initial periods K.G.F. witnessed many debates virtually followed by fisticuffs between the atheists and theists. In 1908 one thousand workers and their families took Pancha Sheel under Bhikku U. Visuddha, an Irish Monk. Bhikkus from Ceylon, Burma, Thailand and Siam visited K.G.F. and preached among the Gold Mine workers.<sup>22</sup> The weekly meetings held at the Society's hall attracted huge crowds among non-Buddhists also. In Champion Reefs Society before the close of its two years from its

inception 89 lectures had been delivered. Prof. Lakshmi Narasu from Madras, A. P. Periyaswamy Pulavar from Tirupathur, K. A. Pattabiramar, son of Pandit Ayothi Doss and Editor of 'Tamizhan' (1914-19). Soppaneswari Ammal and others spoke in those meetings.<sup>23</sup>

To the library of this society were added Buddhist works, inscriptions, palm leaf Manuscripts, Foreign Journals and it was a great Buddhist research Centre. Day long lectures were delivered during annual days and Full Moon days were celebrated under the auspices of these societies. Sankaranthi was interpreted as the Buddha's demise day and they celebrated Pongal Vizha as a Buddhist festival. Marriages without rituals, with the groom and the bride swearing mutual oaths in the name of Thirukkural and Dhamma were performed<sup>24</sup> The inter-caste marriage between Annapoorani, Daughter of Pandithamani G. Appaduraiar and A. Rathinasabapathy (1932) attracted the attention of all. The said marriage was cited as an instance of Reformed Marriage at Rationalists Meetings in Tamil Nadu. This couple later on turned out to be orators and writers in Periyar E.V.R's Rationalist movement.

Burmese Monk U. Kantha opened the Buddhist Young Men Association (1921) in order to enable the youth to be of assistance to the K G F. Buddhist Associations and to

produce among them the habit of reading Buddhist works and journals and to inculcate good habits among them. A separate library was also set up for the said youth Association.<sup>25</sup>

A feature of the activities of the K.G.F. Buddhist Associations was the Printing and Publishing of Buddhist literature. M.Y.M. Printing Press was owned by M.Y. Murugesar at Madras and Siddhartha Printing Press K.G.F. was owned by P.M. Rajarathinam. A number of Buddhist works, reprints of Pandit Ayothi Doss's works and books written by E.N. Ayyakkannu Pulavar and Pandithamani G. Appaduraiar were published through the Siddhartha Book Depot, K.G.F.

After the demise of the founder-leaders, these societies fell. The Buddhist Association and the Buddhist Youth Association activities declined as a result of these Organisations' involvement in efforts taken to find solutions to the member's matrimonial disputes, contact with political movements, lack of funds and lack of support from the Indian Maha Bhodhi Society. Now I. Ulaganathan the dedicated son of E.N. Iyakkannu Pulavar is running the Marikuppam Buddhist School and Co-ordinates the activities of the Buddhists at Kolar Gold Fields.

### **Bangalore Buddhist Association:**

Bangalore Buddhist Association was established in 1907 by Pandit K. Ayothi Doss.

The high officials in the then English army at Bangalore helped in the growth of this association. A Buddha Vihar was constructed in 1918 on the land donated by Bangalore Philanthropist Doddanna Chetty. From 1914 a Buddhist school was established under the aegis of this Association. In 1920 the Second South Buddhist conference was held in Mayo Hall. Prof. Lakshmi Narasu presided over the conference.

Hubli Buddhist Association was established in 1928 by the workers employed at Hubli Railway workshop. An Anglo-Indian Vernacular School was also run on behalf of this Association.

### **Buddhist Associations in North Arcot District:**

A. P. Periaswamy Pulavar and T. N. Hanumantha Upasagar established the Buddhist Association in Tirupathur in 1916. Several Buddhist Meetings and social reform meetings were held on behalf of this branch. Rao Saheb Ponnuru Krishnaswamy Pillai, the Tirupathur Municipal Chairman and advocate propagated Buddhism in and around Tirupathur.

There were Buddhist Associations in Pallikonda, Azhinchi Kuppam, Kavanur, Tippasamudram, Nagavedu, Walajapet, Vannivedu and Sakkaramallur in North Arcot District. A. P. Periaswamy Pulavar was responsible for the establishment and growth of

these branches.<sup>26</sup> Apart from these, there were branches in Secunderabad and Madanapaltee.

### Abroad:

Krishnaswamiar had already gone with Pandit Ayothi Doss to Sri Lanka and took Pancha Sheela. He went to Rangoon and was the speaker of the Sangam which had been founded there.<sup>27</sup> The relatives of E. N. Ayakkannu Pulavar, a teacher of the Buddhist School of Marikuppam, K.G.F., started Natal Buddhist Society in South Africa.<sup>28</sup> Nagamuthu, the Chairman of this society had also been the President of the International Tamil cultural Movement.

### Works.

Buddhist Religious works, were written and Published by Pandit Ayothi Doss. The Siddhartha Book Depot, K.G.F. republished these works.

Pandit Ayothi Doss's 'Buddharathu Aivedam' (1912., pp. 296) narrates Buddha's history and Buddhist Religious Doctrines. 'Buddhist Doctrines-Questions and Answers' (Second Edn., 1912 pp. 40) had been published several times, 'Indirar Desa Charithiram' (1931, pp 184) 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

'Athichuvadi', 'Kundraiventhan' and 'Vetri Gnanam' are interpreted in a new light.

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Pandithamani G. Appaduraiar revived 'Tamizhan' (1926 - 1935) whose Publication came to a halt at Mardras in 1922. His 'Buddhar Arularam' (1950) a Buddhist Doctrine is still to-date a work of great scholarship. E.N. Ayyakannu Pulavar wrote several poems in praise of Buddha and composed several Buddhist hymns. His 'Buddha0r Charithirappa' a biography of Buddha in Tamil verses is in manuscript form.

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