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Gajendran Ayyathurai

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# COLONIALISM, CASTE, AND GENDER:

## *The Emergence of Critical Caste Feminism in Modern South India*

Gajendran Ayyathurai

*Subaltern studies, and postcolonial scholarship more broadly, has perceptively analyzed women's conditions in colonial India. Recent scholarship, however, has demonstrated the limitations of these approaches for understanding women's struggles against the interconnected problems of patriarchy and upper-caste power. This article builds on and extends this critical task. It demonstrates that Tamil Buddhist women and men in early twentieth-century Tamil Nadu repudiated privileged-caste patriarchy precisely because they understood caste and gender to be mutually constitutive. Through an analysis of the archive of The Tamilian (1907–1914), a weekly newspaper of the Tamil Buddhist movement, this study suggests that Tamil Buddhists argued that caste-based patriarchal power ascended during the colonial era by marginalizing Indian women in general, and by othering lower-caste and untouchable women and men, in particular. This necessitated the mobilization of Tamil Buddhists around critical caste feminism in colonial India.*

The rise of Tamil Buddhists in late nineteenth-century colonial South India led to a new critique of gender inequality. Tamil Buddhists, who were mostly from caste-based oppressed communities, challenged brahminical religious and cultural codifications that had led to the humiliation and death of women and girls. Tamil Buddhist women and men began writing in the weekly newspaper *The Tamilian* (1907–1914) first and foremost in opposition to caste, but they also connected that struggle to the problem of gendered oppression of Indian women and girls. The establishment of a critical caste reading public had the potential to create unprecedented possibilities for Tamil Buddhists to register their thoughts on women's emancipation from patriarchy. Some Tamil Buddhists underscored how patriarchy intersected with religio-cultural, educational, and emotional aspects of Indian society. This article examines the intersectionality of caste-based oppressed communities during colonialism; that is, how Tamil Buddhist women and men have positioned themselves on the problem of patriarchy by seeing its connections with caste, religion, education, labor, economy, and sexuality in modern South India.

Scholarly studies have emphasized the persistent failure to address the interrelated problems of caste and gender. For instance, the feminist

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historian Uma Chakravarti notes, "Caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy are the organizing principles of the brahminical social order and despite their close interconnections neither scholars of the caste system nor feminist scholars have attempted to analyze the relationship between the two."<sup>1</sup> Among many reasons, three major factors have hampered a combined understanding of caste and gender in modern India.

First, European imperialism and its lasting damage to India could only generate thus far the call to provincialize Eurocentric ideas and institutionalizations of hegemony.<sup>2</sup> However, scholars have inadequately addressed the need to provincialize brahminical concepts, categories, frameworks, proxies, artifacts, institutions, and practices, with implications on women's subordinated status in India. Even when both colonialism and brahminism acted against various religious, regional, and vernacular communities, women's internal colonialism became benign to both nationalists and postcolonial theorists, while external colonialism was seen as malignant.

Second, despite the reams of studies on caste from colonial times, some of which even empathize with the conditions of the "broken" (Dalit) communities, a majority of them have interpreted patriarchal views of caste as structurally indispensable to the social equilibrium of Indian society. Thus, the studies resolutely overlook how women in South Asia have been prone to privileged-caste patriarchal besiegement. This is amply evident, for instance, in the way brahmin-male power has defined the nature of "brahmin women" versus other caste women through brahminical heteronormativity.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, as historian Markus P. M. Vink shows, "revisionist scholarship has emphasized the need to politicize and historicize the history of religion (and subsequently caste) in pre-colonial India."<sup>4</sup> However, a critique of how minority privileged-caste groups, such as brahmins, prevailed over the majority of women and Indians during precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial times remains elusive.

Third, historians, historical anthropologists, and sociologists of modern India who are committed to a variety of theoretical and ideological hues have been unable to go beyond state and colonial archives to locate archives of the oppressed women present elsewhere. In addition, there is a compelling need to engage with discursive and non-discursive practices of women in caste-based subordination, which are unrelated to and divergent from what anthropologist Partha Chatterjee writes as the "evidence left behind in autobiographies, family histories, religious tracts, literature, theatre, songs, paintings and such other cultural artefacts that depict life in middle-class homes" of the privileged-caste women.<sup>5</sup>

It is in this context that historian Mrinalini Sinha's observation is relevant that "postcolonial critiques . . . however, have not always been equally attentive to the different trajectories for the language of rights in the collec-

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tive struggles of women and of other marginalized social groups." Crucially, she adds, "Feminist critiques, by the same token, manifest a comparable blind spot."<sup>6</sup> What we see during colonialism is mostly, as Sinha writes, "the consolidation of a normative Indian citizen that was both defined as implicitly male and marked as having, by default, dominant community affiliations (upper caste and Hindu)."<sup>7</sup> In other words, postcolonial critiques have largely overlooked the centrality of collective transformative potentials in the socio-political movements of diverse marginalized communities by preferring to determine their peripheral and microhistorical aspects in India. In addition, such studies have also contributed to privileged-caste feminism in which the voices of the caste-based oppressed women remain marginalized, if not silenced.

In contrast, in the colonial context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Tamil Buddhist women and men, who were at the caste margins, came together reflexively to realize the inseparability of caste and gender—a point of view not taken seriously among Indian feminist discourses at that time. For the Tamil Buddhists, the denial of what philosopher Judith Butler refers to as the "feeling, desire, and the body" of women through limited notions of humanness—that is, naturalizing the privileged male and underprivileged female—was embedded in caste.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the Tamil Buddhist movement generated intersectional, intertextual (cross-referencing various ancient, medieval, and modern textual sources), and intermodal (linking various knowledge practices and inventions) critiques opposing both caste and gender problems in the Tamil-speaking regions. These critiques had, and continue to have, subcontinental relevance, especially as a perspective not taken seriously among recognized Indian feminist discourses, which are trapped, as historian Shailaja Paik points out, in various "forms of Brahmanism."<sup>9</sup> Through this archive of the oppressed, we see how gendered sociality can never be overlooked in any study of caste and why the mythologies and realities of caste should never be set aside in any study of gender relations in India, and vice versa.<sup>10</sup> Here, we also see the emergence of a critique that is equally sensitive to both caste and gender problems: critical caste feminism.

In short, critical caste feminism is a critique of Indian society for overlooking the problems of caste and gender going back to precolonial times.<sup>11</sup> Tamil Buddhist women as critical feminists actively opposed this historic injustice and asserted their sense of castelessness through their practices and writings. They not only rejected brahminical institutions such as child marriage and widowhood, but also offered an alternative vision, insisting on women's education and employment, as well as anticaste (intercaste), interreligious, and love-based marriages. Unlike many "male-centered" anticaste social movements elsewhere in India, gender was central to and

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inseparable from the Tamil Buddhist critique of caste.<sup>12</sup> As the voice of women (and men) against caste power has not become a principal focus of social sciences and humanities research on South Asia, it is significant that we are now in a position to examine the critical caste feminist standpoints of Tamil Buddhists by studying their own vernacular archival materials, which were written, published, and circulated in the Tamil-speaking regions more than a century ago.<sup>13</sup>

To be sure, there have been some scholarly studies about the Tamil-speaking regions that go beyond simply "writing history from the male point of view," such as historian S. Anandhi's study on the "women's question" within the Self-Respect Movement in Madras Presidency, beginning in the 1920s.<sup>14</sup> More recently, important scholarship has focused on the "proto-feminist politics" of postcolonial "Dalit women" in the Tamil-speaking regions of South India.<sup>15</sup> Such anticaste ideas and practices, however, were built on the well-articulated foundations of the Tamil Buddhist movement's critical caste feminism, which predated the late-colonial and postcolonial non-brahmin and "Dalit movements" among Tamils.<sup>16</sup> It is this lacuna that this article aims to redress by examining the formations of Tamil Buddhist critiques of gender oppression at the turn of the twentieth century (and not the details of its late-colonial and postcolonial influences), which was unequivocally conscious of the gender problem's intersectionality with issues of caste, religion, education, labor, economy, and sexuality.

### **Tamil Buddhist Women, the "Lady's Column," and Self-Recognition**

Iyothée Thass (1845–1914), the founder of the Tamil Buddhist movement, engaged in a critical reading of classical Tamil literature as well as Buddhist texts in Pali, Sanskrit, and English, which influenced his perception that Buddhism has always been the *religion of the casteless*, preceding the onslaught of brahminical religious denominations. For Thass, Buddhism was also one of the "religions of the oppressed," even after brahminical predominance in South Asia.<sup>17</sup> More importantly, as a person critical of caste, he was prepared for solidarities with women and men across the world whose only requirement was an unwavering social and political commitment to opposing caste. Thus, he welcomed into his associations those who would break away from brahminhood and other forms of caste privileges.

Therefore, Thass's criticism of caste did not end with engaging the alternative religio-cultural history of India and modern rational transformation only from the point of view of the marginalized communities. The position of women in India equally animated Thass's thoughts and actions as well as those of his associates. *The Tamilian*, a weekly newspaper that Thass published from 1907 until his death in 1914, emerged as a crucial

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platform for integrating anticaste ideas and organizing a movement that contradicted the caste-based social structure. Not surprisingly, *The Tamilian* consistently featured both the lived experiences and the cultural and knowledge traditions of caste-oppressed Tamils and Indians. *The Tamilian* featured unprecedented demands for the dignity of labor, labor rights, wage increase, and prevention of caste-based bodily violence on laboring women, men, and children. It also called for redistribution of land to the tiller, and educational and employment affirmative action through governmental policies for those who were crushed as *Paraiyars* (pariahs) from the Tamil speaking regions and across the subcontinent in the agentic voices of the intellectuals. However, it did not remain confined to the universe of and for poor and lower-caste Tamils. Women's voices remained inseparable from this publication.

Faced with such oppressive conditions, Tamil Buddhist women themselves articulated radical possibilities for women's emancipation. Significantly, *The Tamilian* had a "Lady's Column" in which women and men specifically wrote on a variety of topics connected with girls and women including education, material conditions, marriage (child and otherwise), sexuality, and widowhood—though widowhood was a patriarchal imposition mostly among brahmins and other upper castes. Themes ranging from global and local news clippings about women performing feats, data on widows, child marriage, dowry murder, sati, and women's educational achievements abroad as well as the lack of it in India, were regularly present in *The Tamilian*. In addition, the following themes occupied the pages of the publication from the inaugural to the final issue: women's health; the radical rejection of marital customs and symbols of fidelity imposed on women, such as the groom tying a pendant around the bride's neck (*taali*) and the bride wearing a toe-ring (*metti*), even the very institution of marriage itself, and holding men as the cause for all the woes of women.

The fourth issue of *The Tamilian*, for instance, includes a piece on women's education. The author C. Swapneswari Amball (1846–1936)—who also went by the names Swapneswari and Sarvajana Sagodari ("a sister of all"), and signed off as C. S. Amball—makes a strong case for women's education, even if one prefers to be a homemaker.<sup>18</sup> She explains, "Education refers to all that is learnable and not just getting degrees" and that "education has to be holistic, incorporating books with the three elements of skills, morals, and universal outlook [*arivunool*, *aranoool*, and *akilanool*]."<sup>19</sup> This piece is structured to write about the value of education for women in general, including married women. Citing the ancient Tamil poet Kumarakuruparar, Sagodari makes two points: first, that "to conduct one's life with all pleasures in this world and in the after-life education is the means and a guide in a human being's lifetime;" and second, that "for both sexes

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it is neither one's hairstyle, nor wealth, but only education that is a lasting beauty for humans."<sup>20</sup>

Using the metaphor of how two well-trained bulls are needed to pull the cart and not just one, Sagodari says, "it is not enough that only the husband is educated. If the family has to run well it is vital that the wife too has to have equal education." The failure to let women get an education is, for Sagodari, tantamount to keeping women like "irrational animals" (*vivekamillata mirugankaludan*). Therefore, like "the renouncers, mendicants, saints, poets, orators and so on who have only gained their stature only through educating themselves and not because of their beauty and wealth," women are entitled to be educated as it is required for all humans.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, by quoting the ancient Tamil poet Tiruvalluvar, who said that only education would remain a permanent source of support for humanity, Sagodari concludes that educating married women has to be a marital vow for the husband, the husband's family, and above all, for the married woman herself.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, she titles her writing on the significance of education for women ambiguously yet provocatively, as "An Uneducated Married Woman Is a Husband's Enemy."<sup>23</sup>

In fact, among other themes, Sagodari's writings on education, child marriage, and widow remarriage distinguish her contribution to *The Tamilian* as a critical caste feminist point of view, in contrast to privileged-caste Indian feminists—then and now. Although Sagodari was a Buddhist—she even convinced Iyothee Thass to declare *The Tamilian* as a Buddhist weekly—it was women's emancipation, irrespective of caste, religion, and nation, that formed the core of her position.<sup>24</sup> Considering the tragedies, such as child marriage, child widowhood, and bodily violence, that women faced in early twentieth-century India, Sagodari boldly campaigned in public and wrote about how male-centered law, justice, and social mores intersected with the social, cultural, and economic conditions of women and girls.

In her article in *The Tamilian* entitled, "Hindu Women's Educational Institutions and Stick Dance," Sagodari embarks on a narrative on education itself that brings home the point of universal education, especially for girls.<sup>25</sup> As in "An Uneducated Woman Is a Husband's Enemy," Sagodari develops her thoughts on holistic education, which for her is "learning" (*karkappaduvatu*) through all senses as well as "doing" (*seivatu, nadappatu*), which resonates with Thass's views of *kandupadikkum padippu* (education by doing). Sagodari (much like Thass) advocates for what John Dewey called "the experiential continuum," that is, "an education based upon experience [that] is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences" as well as to build on "what has been done and transmitted from previous human activities."<sup>26</sup> But for Sagodari (and Thass), "this learning and doing also involves one shedding immorality

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[*turkunam*] and wrongdoings [*turseyalkal*] and acquiring morality [*narkunam*] and ethical practices [*narseikaikal*],” true to their Buddhist proclivities.<sup>27</sup> While seeing and hearing could also be the tools of education, for Sagodari, learning and teaching through books remains paramount. For her, books are repositories of knowledge, and so Sagodari appeals for starting young and indulging in them thereafter. In order to drive home her point of view, she effectively uses ancient Tamil women poets, such as Avvai.

In this discourse on education, Sagodari’s position turns sharply when she says that women should take to learning and adhering to correct conduct. Pointedly, Sagodari writes that “in Indian society men are not reprimanded, irrespective of the social and interpersonal damages their actions created, whereas women, even if their action is equal to a mustard seed, society makes a mountain out of a mole hill. Parents, relatives, acquaintances and husbands are no exception in such disembodied acts against women.”<sup>28</sup> Here she comments trenchantly about how people stoop down to say that education leads women to prostitution because they say that women now know how to write to a paramour. Calling such conservatives blind obscurants (*mulu-moodach-sikamanikal*)—a daring attack in early twentieth-century writing repudiating patriarchal restrictions on women—she advocates for education as the only way out of this morass.

As if to comment on men’s domineering presence in education as a liability, particularly due to their prejudices that belittle women’s education, Sagodari discerns that “the present educational system only leads to male-favoring destructive ways of living and the recurrence of lies to cover them.”<sup>29</sup> By comparison, she says that ancient times were more liberal in letting women master and produce literary texts on par with men (a reference to ancient Tamil women poets like Avvai). By taking on men who had styled themselves as pundits, Sagodari scathingly writes that “the meaning of these titles are not even comprehensible to those who adorn them, let alone worth explaining to others.” In fact, she goes on to add that “these pundits (*panditarkal*) are so unprincipled and greedy after material interests that the pundits compose poems and perform for the village, for relatives, for those who come and go, for the dead, for those who are going to die, for those who give and for those who do not give.”<sup>30</sup> Dismissively, Sagodari says that the world recognizes only males with titles such as *paadakar* (singer), *paavalar* (poet), and *naavalar* (orator). For Sagodari, however, these Tamil titles are mere terms of propaganda and do not point to any intellectual difference from those women, uneducated and oppressed due to caste, who also create and perform poems and songs in their everyday lived experience. Sagodari surmises, therefore, that “such an education, performing poems, and assuming the status of a pundit by males is actually self-centered.”<sup>31</sup> This is not only a clear rejection of men clamoring for titles

and power through abstruse creativity, but also a critique of the current educational system, which enables such male-favoring punditry, as useless.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, as we saw above, she does not reject education itself. Instead, Sagodari forcefully campaigns for women's education, which could open new economic and self-empowering opportunities for their emancipation in private and public life.

In fact, Sagodari's views on education are deeply tied to her positions opposing gendered social practices in India. This is evident in her rejection of child marriage and in her inspired mobilization of Tamil Buddhists' opposing this dehumanizing institution. Her criticism of Indian society's apathy regarding child marriage demonstrates Sagodari's insightful understanding of intersectional confinement of girls, who were denied not just education but also other basic entitlements that all humans need to possess. That is, how caste, gender, class, religion, economy, and sexuality come to intersect and define the tradition of child marriage of girls to favor self-privileging men. Sagodari's writings produce what historian Anupama Rao calls a "critique of everyday life" conditions of women and girls to bring about a radical transformation in colonial India.<sup>33</sup>

Titling her piece, "The Tragedies of Child Marriage," Sagodari produces what could be interpreted as a critical caste feminist stand against child marriage. Astutely seeing the intertwined nature of caste and patriarchy, Sagodari politically mobilizes the public by pointing out that the end of patriarchal hegemony has to begin with the dismantling of caste. In fact, her criticism serves as a lens to problematize many ills of Indian social life in general, then and now, such as the role of Hindu doctrinal marital codes; brahminical patriarchy; the four *Varnas* (castes) and their *Jatis* (sub-castes) mirroring Hindu doctrines; insensitivity to female sexuality, the practice of feticide and infanticide; and the tragedy of women's collusion in—not challenging of—child marriage. For her, these are as much the causes as they are the consequences of child marriage: "There are two kinds of people in Indian society who follow marriage rules: either according to Hindu doctrines such as *sruiti* [oral brahminical texts] and *smriti* [written brahminical texts] or by the practices of their forebears. Though they may be Hindus who follow various Hindu gods and goddesses, and their socio-cultural practices may differ in various ways, their caste and religious (Saivite or Vaishnavite) everyday life differences, however, do not stand against their practice of child marriage."<sup>34</sup>

For Sagodari, brahmins patronized this practice because of their privileged caste and class positions.<sup>35</sup> Therefore she rejects privileged-caste groups' insistence that a delay in the marriage of girls who have attained puberty will only lead to the loss of their virginity through premarital relationships, and the father who delays the marriage of the girl who has

attained puberty is actually killing the children she would have conceived with every ovulation.<sup>36</sup> On the contrary, she advocates a delay in the marriage of women so that they can aspire to education and jobs in various fields. Sagodari poignantly reasons that while even nature does not provide for the premature ripening of fruits, human society sacrificing its young to child marriage is puzzling and undeniably wrong. Her enunciation through the metaphor of fruit and its premature ripening in relation to the female body exemplifies her rejection of caste-based mortification of the female body through the demythologization of brahminical texts and practices.

Apart from emphasizing the significance of education and material equality between women and men, Sagodari's criticism of child marriage involves the rejection of limiting brahminical notions of sexuality. This leads to her foregrounding expansive ideas of humanness in which women could overcome the interconnected rigidities of religion, caste, and gender. Sagodari, using the platform of *The Tamilian*, inaugurates a public discourse on what Butler has argued are patriarchally determined limited notions of humanness: that is, narrow views of who is a human would not recognize as humans anyone other than the privileged male and underprivileged female, such as, intersex and transgender persons.<sup>37</sup> By this logic, arguably, a child accepting to be consigned to widowhood as long as she lives is not only celebrated as an "authentic Hindu" but also as befitting the brahminical view of human. Instead, if she resists such brahminical views and asserts her own humanity, she is deemed to be undercutting her very status as a human. The "child widow" is thus vilified for seeking a partner as she grows, for her willingness to get remarried as an adult, and for deciding on her own to have sex and a baby, whether she is willing to get remarried or not. Thus, she is not intelligible to what is deemed human nature through brahminical patriarchal notions.<sup>38</sup>

This is clearly evident in the way Sagodari repudiates Hindu doctrines and their brahmin, male-favoring presuppositions and impositions. More importantly, Sagodari's analysis of the consequences of child marriage in the everyday life of a female child and radical questioning of child marriage unpack the privileged-caste males' motives of sexual exploitation behind the rules of child marriage and prevention of widow remarriage. Her analysis of the custom boldly engages the subject of the young widows' sexuality, and bears excerpting in full:

How could a child, who is widowed as soon as she was married and does not know the world enough, be expected to wean herself away from worldly [sexual] desires [*ulakinbankal*]? Even though those males who seek child marriage do so because they desire virgins as well as due to their fear that if the girls are not married

as children then Indiran, Chandran, and Madan [erotic characters in brahminical myths, stories, and texts] will molest them [*kan-nikaiyai kedupparkalendru*], how can they guard them when their husbands die young? How long can a young widow go on ovulating under her father's vigilance? Should she undergo the curse of killing many kids? Uh oh [*Ayyo*], are they [men] incapable of asking such questions? It is a pity. Did an all-the-desire [*mukkala unarchikalai*] knowing god make these cruel codes [*vitikalai*]? Since those [males] who believe that the gods or ancestors made such marital codes, they could revise the provision for remarriage that was prevalent in olden days and prohibit it now. Likewise, why can't they [men] reject the codes for child marriage and prohibit it? Do young widows, who are prevented from remarriage, remain virgins? Not only do they kill the babies they conceive, but also their own kith and kin collude with them in feticide irrespective of Varna differences. Do brahmins tonsuring the widow's head diminish her sex-appeal [*pirarichiyarkka*]? In any case, these brahmin women, conceiving babies and then being married to someone else, lead to shame and curse, particularly on the widows when they deliver such babies. At least if they do not tonsure the heads of the young widows, no one would know beyond the close relatives, and their masquerade will be spared for sometime from the eyes of others. It is by emulating such brahmins that other Varnas [castes] have not only rejected widow-remarriage but also have contributed to feticide, infanticide, and widow-homicide.<sup>39</sup>

Having raised deconstructing questions on Hindu gods, ancestors, and brahmin males and their codes, Sagodari is not indifferent to brahminical patriarchal conditions promoted by both brahmin and non-brahmin privileged-caste groups in colonial India. Rather, she says that those "sisters" (*Sagodarikal*) who lament young widows' situations should actually work to redress their conditions instead of cursing those who oppose child marriage. However, she writes candidly that more than the married women, some widows oppose remarriage because they prefer to have four or five men as their paramours, only to be exposed when they conceive babies. Such situations are the result of child marriage and the prevention of widow-remarriage, Sagodari explains.

While Sagodari found feticide and newborn murder repugnant, she did not romanticize or glorify the significance of the child over the mother and her bodily needs. Already before the First World War, Sagodari initiated what Marilyn Lake has observed in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, namely that "female desire was put on the political agenda" by women who challenged not only state and religious groups'

views questioning women's thoughts and practices on sexual matters, but also opposed conservative feminism in Australia, which was not prepared to consider the psychosocial and sexual needs of women.<sup>40</sup>

Crucially, Sagodari exposes male-favoring notions of marriage as commodifying and consuming female bodies by denying a corporeal and intellectual consciousness to women as humans. In addition, she problematizes patriarchal power as favoring unborn and delivered babies over the sexual and health needs of women. She dares to unveil how patriarchy and tradition come together to relegate women to a low stature and even deny women the humanity that is partially accorded to their babies. Sagodari thus resonates more with Butler's explication that "a presupposition of humanness, is not only one which, justly or unjustly, governs the recognizability of the human, but one that informs the ways we do or do not recognize ourselves at the level of feeling, desire, and the body."<sup>41</sup>

It is no wonder that Sagodari seeks to reject the brahmin-male world and its marital codes, which valorize a male-favoring sexual economy during the colonial period. Not surprisingly, the writer Gaiutra Bahadur says that as early as 1851, brahmin women took to prostitution to escape persecutions based on marriage and the sexual promiscuity of their brahmin husbands. In addition, they were even prepared to recruit themselves as indentured labor to emigrate to faraway colonial plantations to escape exploitations based on brahmin caste and patriarchy.<sup>42</sup>

Sagodari's writings did not just indict Hindu brahminical patriarchal texts and practices as socially harmful for promoting religiously sanctioned caste-based traditions of discriminating women and widowing children. More significantly, Sagodari demanded a simultaneous educational, material, and cultural transformation in India. By breaching the power of the privileged-caste males, Sagodari voiced the need to take the sexuality of widows seriously. This was undoubtedly against the currents of the colonialist, casteist patriarchy of the Madras Presidency of its day, which always upheld racialized, caste-based, and gendered inequalities through "rule of law," despite introducing ostensibly reformist legislation, such as the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856.<sup>43</sup>

It is important, however, to emphasize that there were other Indian feminists, such as Pandita Ramabai, who rebelled against their own brahmin community with critiques of caste and gender. Sagodari shared common ground with such activists, though they were few and far between. Nevertheless, a comparative analysis of these two particular feminists contributes to a better understanding of their impact on modern Indian society and history.

## Sagodari and Ramabai on Caste and Patriarchy

How do Sagodari's positions compare with pioneering Indian feminists such as Pandita Ramabai (1858–1922)? Sagodari's thoughts on the plight of child marriage and widowhood in India parallel Pandita Ramabai's views opposing such caste- and religion-based problems that subordinate women. Ramabai's relinquishing of her brahmin identity and conversion to Christianity is similar to Sagodari's criticism of brahmins and non-brahmin caste groups and her alignment with anticaste Tamil Buddhists such as Iyothee Thass. In fact, Ramabai's understanding of the differences in gender relations between privileged brahmin and non-brahmin castes and those they marginalized as lower-caste is similar to Sagodari's positions. This is made clear in Ramabai's observations: "Women of the working classes are better off than their sisters of high castes in India, for in many cases they are obliged to depend upon themselves, and an opportunity for cultivating self-reliance is thus afforded in them by which they largely profit. But high-caste women, unless their families are actually destitute of means to keep them, are shut up within the four walls of their house."<sup>44</sup>

In addition, Ramabai took on privileged-caste nationalist legitimization of caste and gender inequality when she wrote that India is "a country where castes and seclusion of women are regarded as essential tenets of the national creed" and that the high-caste woman: "Has undoubtedly bequeathed the fatal legacy of weakness and dullness to her children. The complete submission of women under the Hindu law has in the lapse of millenniums of years converted them into slavery-loving creatures . . . and thus desire to depend upon some other nation [British colonial governance], and not upon themselves."<sup>45</sup>

Ramabai's criticisms of caste, conversion to Christianity, and travels abroad were not due to a naive adulation of Western-style social relations and cultural life or the adoption of Western women as exemplars. Instead, as with Sagodari, they resulted from disenchantment with and revulsion to local religio-caste oppression and exploitation of women.<sup>46</sup> Ramabai's critique and public mobilization produced such an impact among upper caste men and women that they were not tolerable to even her cousin Anandibai Joshee, the first Indian woman to have attained the degree of Doctor of Medicine from the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1886.<sup>47</sup>

At the same time, however, Ramabai's ambiguities about "high-caste people" and her vision of India as a "Hindu nation" contrasted with those of Sagodari. These conflicting viewpoints compel a critical examination of Ramabai's persisting enchantment with caste, racism, and Hinduism. For instance, Ramabai says: "Among the inhabitants of India, the high-caste people rank as the most intelligent; they have been a refined and cultivated

race for more than two thousand years. The women of these castes have been and still are kept in ignorance, yet they have inherited from their fathers, to a certain degree, quickness of perception and intelligence."<sup>48</sup>

More troublesome are Ramabai's recommendations for the liberation of "high-caste women," such as "houses should be opened for the young and high-caste child-widows where they can take shelter without the fear of losing their caste, or of being disturbed in their religious belief, and where they may have entire freedom of action as related to caste-rules, such as cooking food."<sup>49</sup>

High-caste women, such as Ramabai, who had traveled abroad in the nineteenth century and had critically viewed the problems of race and genocide against Native Americans but appreciated "the freedom of the western Women" could not challenge the problem of caste resolutely.<sup>50</sup> While interrogating certain aspects of brahminical patriarchy, their visions and practices were primarily concerned with the liberation of the privileged-caste women from their own caste clutches. It remains debatable whether they were for women's movements that would unequivocally seek the emancipation of all women, especially those most oppressed.

In fact, privileged-caste women's ambivalence toward the caste system reveals that they had not fully arrived at the significance of annihilating caste for the complete emancipation of women; instead, they had settled on the conditions of women's constrained "rights." This is due to the pervasiveness of brahmin-male views legitimized through intersecting racial, cultural, religious, economic, and historical values, as well as acquiescence with brahminical patriarchy, which deemed that the aspirations of women could *only* be sought within the brahminical patriarchal boundaries. Ramabai's cousin Anandhibai's plans to become a doctor terminated only because she was determined to follow her brahmin-male exemplars' codifications. Tragically, Anandhibai carried the burden of brahmin-male power to her death in her early twenties, after all her medical education in the United States.

Therefore, caste-based belief in—and mirroring of—the brahminical patriarchal cultural and religious traditions held back the radicalism of women (of privileged castes) from breaching the brahminical mold.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, privileged-caste women could afford to conduct their lives through strategic subordination, for instance, aspiring to and achieving western education and travel abroad, while at the same time paying obeisance to brahminical orthodoxies and practices, such as "pure vegetarianism." Such possibilities were not available for underprivileged women. As Shailaja Paik explains, "the oppression of brahman women is mediated by brahmanical privilege, they are complicit in their power and situation of advantage" over non-brahmin women.<sup>52</sup> Therefore the potential for caste-breaching universal sisterhood among Indian women could never come forth from the privileged-caste

women who undoubtedly were better placed to do so than untouchable and lower-caste women. This is still the case in the twenty-first century, as Uma Chakravarti points out about upper-caste women's antipathy to intercaste, i.e. anticaste marriages.<sup>53</sup> Arguably, Ramabai, who dared to break away from the brahminical patriarchy and voice her concerns for untouchable girls' and women's education and employment, could not free herself from the ambiguities of caste privileges, unlike anticaste women such as Sagodari, who were unequivocal.

In fact, there were exemplary women from the marginalized communities of the Marathi-speaking regions who were more resolute than Ramabai in connecting women's oppression to their anticaste critique. For instance, Muktabai Salve, a student of Savitribai and Jotiba Phule, critiqued brahminical patriarchy in 1855. "These brahmins," she wrote, "the great gluttons, who consider [themselves] superior to us and hate us, they counter that the Vedas are their own property. Now obviously, the Vedas are only for brahmins, they are absolutely not for us. . . . Let that religion, where only one person is privileged and the rest are deprived, perish from the earth." This was as unambiguous as Sagodari's opposition to brahmin males' textualization of casteism.<sup>54</sup> Likewise, Tarabai Shinde, critiquing the mimicry of gender discrimination among non-brahmin caste groups in 1882, argued that "men are invariably guilty of the very vices they accuse women of, and next, that men are often responsible even for the few vices women do have," and is comparable to Sagodari (and other Tamil Buddhist women) who took on caste and gender problems inseparably and uncompromisingly.<sup>55</sup>

Sagodari's searing intersectional critique against caste and patriarchy spread within the Tamil Buddhist movement and in the Tamil public sphere. The cause also flourished due to the camaraderie that Iyothee Thass shared with Sagodari. Their collaboration was resolutely based on critical caste feminism—ironically missing in postcolonial theories that predominate in the academy. For example, Thass opened the "Lady's Column" as a forum for emerging radical women's voices—a rare gesture amid the white male-centered colonialist discourses and brahmin male-centered nationalist discourses of the time. Therefore, I now turn to an examination of Thass's own views on gender and caste and other related aspects in Indian society to further understand his positions.

### **Iyothee Thass, Feminist Critique, and Undoing Caste**

The vision of *The Tamilian* editor Iyothee Thass significantly enabled Sagodari and other Tamil Buddhist women and men to speak their minds, in spite of the challenging conditions of colonial South India. His establishment of the "Lady's Column" in which Tamil Buddhist women could write

on a variety of intersectional concerns marks his awareness of the need and ability of women to speak for themselves about their condition, even as men wrote alongside them. Issues ranging from religion, caste, customs, ancestors, sexuality, and patriarchy were addressed because *The Tamilian* served as the only medium in the Tamil-speaking regions then that brought women and men together to raise their voices on anticaste and gender parity issues.

The tidbits about world news that Thass published by collecting from other sources had a direct bearing on what women and men wrote in the weekly, especially on women's issues. For instance, under the title "India and its Young Widows," Thass writes that, according to the 1901 census, 25,991,936 widows existed in India, of which there were 391,147 under the age of fifteen, 115,285 under ten, and 19,487 under five. In the Madras Presidency, there were 22,446 under fifteen years, 18,078 from ten to fifteen, 3,751 under ten, 617 under five, 60 under three, 23 under two, and 15 under one year old.<sup>56</sup> This data would have provoked many readers of *The Tamilian* to be aware of the gravity of the child marriage custom in India and to reject it. Other topics covered in *The Tamilian* included news about the employment of women in the post office; a weather advisory for pregnant women going away from home; scholarships for girls; sati in Calcutta; women doctors; a woman hunter; a girl hardware specialist in St. Louis, Missouri; and a gutsy woman who chased a thief away from a ladies' train car in the United States. Such features reveal a sensitivity to the dignity of women's valor and labor that *The Tamilian* carried to its readers under Thass's dynamic editorship.

Thass, like Sagodari, was unwavering when it came to marital customs in India. He was not only principally opposed to caste- and religion-based marital rituals, but was also against the markers of marriage in the everyday lives of women, such as *taali* (the pendant that the husband ties around the neck of a woman to mark her as his wife, while nothing marks him as her husband and attests to his fidelity); in addition, he rejected endogamy that (then as now) prevented anticaste, interregional, and intercontinental marriages. For instance, to a letter from one S. Muniswamiyar of 74 Thirty-Ninth Street, Rangoon (in present-day Myanmar), on March 11, 1913, which inquires whether *metti* (a ring that is put on the bride and groom's toes during the marriage ceremony, but only the wife wears as long as she is married) is a Buddhist practice or one belonging to those who have invented themselves into various castes. Thass bluntly replies that *metti* is neither Buddhist nor Hindu but of recent foolish invention and a useless custom.<sup>57</sup> Likewise, he rejects *taali*, which is considered a sacred symbol of marriage among Hindu women in India in general, and among Tamil women in particular, irrespective of their religion (Tamil Christian and Muslim women also wear it in various forms).

In an editorial piece titled, "Should Tying Taali Determine a Marriage," Thass says that he is bemused by some in India who claim that only when one ties a taali is a marriage solemnized, and that a Hindu should not marry a woman from other religions. "Such a requirement," he says, "is only a ploy to leave without any legitimacy and material support the woman who has gone against Hindu codes of marriage or married a Hindu man by a simple civil marriage and has a child through him."<sup>58</sup> Thass insists that reality proves a person's character and actions change all the time, whereas for those men who retain second (upper-caste) names such as "Iyer, Mudali, Naidu, and Chetty," the codes of marriage do not change but remain frozen.<sup>59</sup> Unequivocally, he points out that "when an American or a European lives with a Hindu woman and has a child, neither the propriety of such a marriage nor the foreigner's support to the woman and child is rejected, and those who promulgate such codes [upper castes] turn a blind eye."<sup>60</sup> In other words, he reads that the marriage rituals and codes are to maintain patriarchal caste power and to prevent anticaste marriage, while sexual relations and marriage between a white man and upper-caste woman are condoned—a continuing trend even one hundred years after Thass's observations, since one does not come across the murder of upper-caste women in love relationships with white Americans or Europeans as is the case between a "non-Dalit" woman and "Dalit man."<sup>61</sup> Here Thass exposes how those who privileged themselves by caste-based marriage rules and who produced and promoted a segmented sociality subjugating others they condemned as lower castes, stoop before racial privileges, before white westerners. As a critic of caste and gender disparity, Thass rejects such exploitative marital codes and rituals based on caste and race that not only privilege the upper-caste Hindu man and the white man, but also leave unprotected a woman who decides to break the caste rules for love, sex, marriage, or a child. In other words, Thass clearly exposes the political economy of casteism.

The customs and codes aimed at humiliating widows also come under Thass's scrutiny. Apart from questioning the superstitions surrounding brahmin widows, which say that one should not encounter them when setting out from one's home, he goes on to examine the gruesomeness of widowhood.<sup>62</sup> These pro-women ideas and practices do not just emerge from his evaluation of caste and religious codes and brahminical patriarchy, which could absolve his own male self. Rather, Thass's writings demonstrate his feminist ideas, which are also fundamentally an auto-critique holding the male world responsible for all women's conditions. This is profoundly clear in his editorial entitled in English, "Who is Responsible for the Fallen Condition of the Women of India? It is the Men Themselves."<sup>63</sup>

Using the Tamil adage that even a mouse has two wives during the harvest season, Thass begins his essay about polygamy and its implications on a woman's body and life:

In India, when a person joins an office [colonial government jobs] it is axiomatic that he has to have two wives, one at home and one outside. This legitimacy to indulge in polygamy has crippled the wives into doing things that will always please the man [*ayya*]. When the man dies for some reason, such women are forced in search of other men in order to survive. This is because they have not been equipped to live through education and vocational skills. It is transparent that husbands are responsible for the lack of education, vocational skills, and debilitation of women's body through diseases. However, even if men realize this, the Hindu Shastras [doctrinal codes] and male-favoring sex stories [*andapurattu kataikal*] come together to persuade them that women are not entitled to have self-interest, education, and jobs to which men are assumed to be entitled. Since the men are responsible for the subjugation of women and their degeneration, they are equally responsible for all other ills in society.<sup>64</sup>

For Thass, gender-based oppression intersects with, and provides a means to better understand, other problems in Indian society, especially caste.

Given the understanding of gender issues and progress made in women's rights today, at least in some parts of the globe, one could say that Thass was not radical enough to articulate the subject of women then, nor could he mobilize women as much as he worked for the anticaste Buddhist movement. In fact, one can even point to his ambiguities towards some conventions of married women and their devotion to husbands and their family's well-being, as was the case with Sagodari and Ramabai.

In sum, both a reasonable understanding of *The Tamilian* and the instances of Thass and Sagodari advocating radical transformation for women's cultural and economic conditions confirm that a multifaceted feminist criticism of Indian society, inseparable from the problems of caste, was anchored in South India in the early twentieth century. Thus, Tamil Buddhists laid the foundation for critical caste feminism—a perspective that is yet to become central to feminist theories and practices in twenty-first-century India. It is also clear that, along with standing behind women, they were instrumental in instructing Buddhist, Tamil, and all Indian men to take up the annihilation of caste, which has promoted gender differences and inequalities.

Sagodari and Thass mobilized the reading public to oppose the intertwined problems of caste and patriarchy, which resonated with many Tamil Buddhists. This was also the Tamil Buddhist polyphonic assertion. For instance, the Tamil Buddhist L. P. C. Arokiasawmy writes in detail about the significance of female education as the route to women's emancipation.<sup>65</sup> Likewise, Annapoorani, who was also a critical caste feminist, breached caste by marrying a person who also rebelled against his own upper-caste family. She was a popular exemplar among the Tamil Buddhists and in the anticaste self-respect movement of E. V. Ramasamy Periyar (1879–1973). Annapoorani's body of work in critical caste feminism was regularly published in the Self-Respect movement's journal *Kudi Arasu*, which critiqued caste and patriarchy.<sup>66</sup> In fact, without the Tamil Buddhists' critical caste feminism and their active assertions, atheist and anticaste feminist leaders like Periyar could not have embraced Buddhist methods of critiquing caste and gender problems from the early twentieth century. Historian V. Geetha writes that Buddha's words that "rational minds could not comprehend or accept ideas such as heaven, hell, salvation, and differences between human beings, such as brahmin, shudra and panchama" resonated with Periyar. We can thus view him as also a descendant of the critical caste feminist movement of the early twentieth century.<sup>67</sup> What is important to note here is the presence of Tamil Buddhist women and men who were critical caste feminists from the late nineteenth century. Their ideas, practices, and movements would spread gradually in the Tamil-speaking regions over the coming decades.

## Conclusion

Gender relations in colonial India grew out of and intertwined with the caste-based sociality of Indian society. Brahmin-male power shut its exclusionary door to women, identified as Other. This included brahmin women as well as lower-caste and untouchable women in both religious and secular matters. Therefore, brahmin-male power is singularly responsible for the unleashing of religio-cultural oppression and caste-based bodily violence, the history of which only now do we begin to understand. Brahmin men were not just self-serving writers and interpreters of religious texts and guardians of social practices designed for their benefit, such as the prevention of anticaste marriage and widow remarriage, and the promotion of child marriage. More problematically, the brahmin males served as gatekeepers to colonial modernity against their own caste women as well as men and women they othered as untouchables and lower castes, while self-ghettoizing themselves in brahminical traditions. The non-brahmin privileged-caste males found their own patriarchal-caste niche within the social norms and governmental rules and regulations, which were actually

designed and enforced by the comprador brahmin males who colluded with the colonial racial apparatuses.

Our understanding of the history of caste and gender in modern India has increased with the arrival of postcolonial and subaltern studies. Nevertheless, among others, these scholarships have yet to adequately address the question: how have the women who suffered from both colonial racism and (pre- and postcolonial) casteism resisted colonialist casteist patriarchy, personally and collectively? We now know that the privileged-caste males' educational and monetary accumulations resulted from their caste-based service as go-betweens among colonial authorities.<sup>68</sup> Equally important is to examine their patriarchal power to deny such life-affirming economic and cultural opportunities to women in general and to those they discriminated against as lower caste and untouchable in particular. For these reasons, the politics of the privileged was essentially the politics of brahmin-male power in colonial India.

This study shows that Tamil Buddhists responded to this situation by rejecting the Hindu doctrines, the brahminical knowledge and cultural traditions, and the privileged-caste groups that legitimized caste and gender inequalities simultaneously. They dared to expose the irrationalities of brahminical religion-inspired everyday social and economic practices, which not only exploited the labor of subordinated communities and women but also denied their humanity. Through this study, we find that there emerged socially vibrant and politically radical critical caste feminist discursive and non-discursive practices among the Tamil Buddhists in early twentieth-century India. This critical caste feminism of the Tamil Buddhists anticipates the priorities of postcolonial "Dalit feminism" and "Dalit Bahujan feminism" without essentializing an irredeemable brokenness or subordination of the oppressed women.<sup>69</sup> In addition, the Tamil Buddhist critical caste feminism assured many possibilities against caste and patriarchy of all kinds, including the potential to counter "dalit patriarchy" as suggested by Gopal Guru.<sup>70</sup> Likewise, it does not reinscribe any caste-based counteridentity ignoring internal patriarchal problems as an alternative to brahminical patriarchy but aspires to "a universalizing politics of women."<sup>71</sup> In this sense, the Tamil Buddhist critical caste feminism envisions the self-respect and other anticaste movements in the Tamil-speaking regions.

## NOTES

This essay is dedicated to sister D. Sharifa Khanam of STEPS, Pudukottai, Tamil Nadu, whose life is devoted to the equality of women and girls. Uma Chakravarti, Santhi N.S, Adriana Garriga-López Rupa Viswanath, Karin Klenke, Gopal Guru, and Amudha Ganesan have influenced my understanding of women's standpoints over the years. I thank them all.

<sup>1</sup>Uma Chakravarti, "Conceptualizing Brahminical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class, and State," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 14 (1993): 579–585, 579.

<sup>2</sup>See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). Vivek Chibber critiques subaltern and postcolonial theorists for undermining class analysis but overlooks the significance of caste analysis in South Asian societies; see Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2013).

<sup>3</sup>For more details, see Shefali Chandra, *The Sexual Life of English: Languages of Caste and Desire in Colonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup>Markus P. M. Vink, "Images and Ideologies of Dutch-South Asian Contact: Cross-cultural Encounters between the Nayaka state of Madurai and the Dutch East India Company in the Seventeenth Century," *Itinerario* 21, no. 2 (1997): 82–124, 87.

<sup>5</sup>Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," in *Recasting Women*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Zubaan, 1989): 233–253, 251.

<sup>6</sup>Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 12–13.

<sup>7</sup>Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*, 14.

<sup>8</sup>Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 58.

<sup>9</sup>Shailaja Paik, "Amchya Jalmachi Chittarkatha (The Bioscope of Our Lives): Who Is My Ally?," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 40 (2009): 39–47, 45. For a pioneering critique of "upper caste women" dominating in Indian feminist "theory and politics" and caste-discrimination against "Dalit women," see Gopal Guru, "Dalit Women Talk Differently," *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no. 41–42 (1995): 2548–2550.

<sup>10</sup>Though this study primarily engages with women's conditions based on caste and patriarchy, it is important to take note of Judith Butler's and other scholars' critiques that the category "gender" needs go beyond the male-female binary. That is, the lives and rights of LGBTQIA+ people equally matter in the theory, practice, and politics of gender. For more details, see Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* and *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

<sup>11</sup>Critical caste feminism is central to the new subfield that I have recently initiated, namely Critical Caste Studies, which is an interdisciplinary critique of all forms of past and present caste-based ideas, artifacts, aesthetics, institutions, and practices in Indian society and in the Indian diasporic communities across Indian, Atlantic, and Pacific Oceans.

<sup>12</sup>Shailaja Paik, "Forging a New Dalit Womanhood in Colonial Western India: Discourse on Modernity, Rights, Education, and Emancipation," *Journal of Women's History* 28, no 4 (2016): 14–40, 14.

<sup>13</sup>Notable exceptions are Uma Chakravarti, "Conceptualizing Brahminical Patriarchy"; Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste through a Feminist Lens* (Kolkata: Stree, 2003); V. Geetha, "Periyar, women, and an ethic of citizenship" in *Gender & Caste*, ed. Anupama Rao (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003), 180–203; and Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006).

<sup>14</sup>S. Anandhi, "The Women's Question in the Dravidian Movement c. 1925–1948," in *Caste & Gender*, ed. Anupama Rao (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2004), 141–163, 156.

<sup>15</sup>S. Anandhi and Karin Kapadia, *Dalit Women: Vanguard of an Alternative Politics in India* (Oxford: Routledge, 2017), 30.

<sup>16</sup>Regarding a short analysis of such Tamil Buddhist ideas see V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar* (Calcutta: Samya, 1998). I am currently completing a detailed study of Tamil Buddhism in the book project titled, "Deep Resistance: Buddhism, Caste, and the Marginalized in Colonial India."

<sup>17</sup>G. Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity* (Bangalore: New International, 2000), 7. For a global understanding of radical movements against racism and colonialism, see Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed: A Study of the Modern Messianic Cults* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1963).

<sup>18</sup>The author C. S. Amball, the manager of a widow home, was also the editor of her own women's magazine, *Tamil Maadu*, and remained a regular contributor of women's points of view to *The Tamilian*. She was a close friend and confidante of Thass as demonstrated by her editorial in *Tamil Maadu* on *The Tamilian*, which Thass republished in *The Tamilian* I, no. 9, August 14, 1907, 4.

<sup>19</sup>C. S. Amball, "Kallaapenndeer Kanavanukku Satturu," *The Tamilian* I, no. 4, July 10, 1907, 3.

<sup>20</sup>Amball, "Kallaapenndeer," 3.

<sup>21</sup>Amball, "Kallaapenndeer," 3.

<sup>22</sup>Amball, "Kallaapenndeer," 3.

<sup>23</sup>Amball, "Kallaapenndeer," 3.

<sup>24</sup>Among the Tamil Buddhists Amball was known as "Mahaupasaki" in Tamil. This means "an exemplary Buddhist woman dedicated to a Buddhist way of life." N. Jeenaraju, *Bautha Sadangu Muraikal* (Perambalur, Chennai: South Indian Buddhist Association Publications, 1998), 55–56. I thank historian Professor K. Balamurugan for this reference.

<sup>25</sup>C. S. Amball, "Indupenkai Kalvissalaaiyum Kolaatamum," *The Tamilian* IV, no. 43, April 5, 1911, 4.

<sup>26</sup>See J. Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), 16–17, 34. For a discussion on experience-based theorization of oppressed

communities' politics and history in India, see G. Guru and S. Sarukkai, *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>27</sup>C. S. Amball, "Indutesa Poorvappennkalin Kalvi," *The Tamilian* I, no. 9, August 14, 1907, 3.

<sup>28</sup>Amball, "Indutesa," 3.

<sup>29</sup>Amball, "Indutesa," 3.

<sup>30</sup>Amball, "Indutesa," 3.

<sup>31</sup>Amball, "Indutesa," 3.

<sup>32</sup>This is similar to Thass's rejection of the BA and MA degrees of the upper castes as useless to the majority of Indians, meant to ensure only the privileged-caste groups' exclusionary prosperity through colonial education and administrative employment. See Iyothee Thass, "Swadesa Seertirutam," *The Tamilian* I, no. 17, October 9, 1907, 4.

<sup>33</sup>Anupama Rao, "The Word and the World: Dalit Aesthetics as a Critique of Everyday Life," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 53, no. 1–2 (2017): 147–161, 147.

<sup>34</sup>C. S. Amball, "Paaliyal Vivaakataal Vilayum Kedukal," *The Tamilian* VII, no. 24, November 19, 1913, 3–4.

<sup>35</sup>For a detailed explanation of how "Brahmin males" have come to dominate Indian history, culture, and society, see Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: Penguin, 2009). For the exclusionary emergence of "'new colonial' bilingual Brahmins," see Shefali Chandra, "Mimicry, Masculinity, and the Mystique of English Education 1870–1900," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 68, no. 1 (February 2009): 199–225.

<sup>36</sup>Amball, "Paaliyal Vivaakataal Vilayum Kedukal," 3–4. This is a searing critique of anti-women male doctrines such as Manusmriti.

<sup>37</sup>See Butler, *Undoing Gender*.

<sup>38</sup>Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 57.

<sup>39</sup>Amball, "Paaliyal Vivaakataal Vilayum Kedukal," 3–4.

<sup>40</sup>See Marilyn Lake, "Female Desires: The Meaning of World War II," in *Feminism and History*, ed. J. W. Scott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 429–449, 446.

<sup>41</sup>Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 58.

<sup>42</sup>Gaiutra Bahadur, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (London: Hurst, 2013), 35–36.

<sup>43</sup>See Elizabeth Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India: White Violence and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>44</sup>P. R. Sarasvati, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (Westport, CT: Hyperion Press, 1976), xi.

<sup>45</sup>Sarasvati, *The High-Caste*, 55–56.

<sup>46</sup>For a detailed analysis of Pandita Ramabai, see Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998).

<sup>47</sup>Anandibai Joshee's caste proclivities are clear through her statements such as: "I will go [to America] as a Hindu [Brahmin?], and come back and live among my people as a Hindu." She was also known for her defense of child marriage as the "national custom." Regarding Joshee's determination to live in America as per the Manu's code and the eventual death due to ill health resulting from orthodoxies about food, Rachel L. Bodley says, "Brave, patriotic words! A resolve which was carried out to the death." As soon as she returned from the United States, Anandhibai Joshee died at just twenty-two years of age. See P. R. Sarasvati, *The High-Caste*, 59.

<sup>48</sup>Sarasvati, *The High-Caste*, 60–61.

<sup>49</sup>Sarasvati, *The High-Caste*, 62–63.

<sup>50</sup>For Pandita Ramabai's views on African Americans and Native Americans see M. Kosambi, ed. *Pandita Ramabai's American Encounter: The Peoples of the United States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

<sup>51</sup>A century later, the imposition of traditional cultural practices such as arranged marriage and dowry demands on brides' families, and bodily violence against women and men who dare to engage in "love marriage"—and murdering them through what is euphemistically called "honor killing"—continue to hold sway in Indian society.

<sup>52</sup>See Shailaja Paik, "Who Is My Ally?," 45.

<sup>53</sup>See Uma Chakravarti, "Through Another Lens: Men, Women and Caste," in *Translating Caste*, ed. Tapan Basu (New Delhi: Katha, 2002), 198–218.

<sup>54</sup>Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present: Volume 1* (London: Pandora, 1991), 215.

<sup>55</sup>Quoted in Tharu and Lalitha, *Women Writing*, 221–222.

<sup>56</sup>Iyothee Thass, "Indiyavum Ilamkaimpenngalum," *The Tamilian* I, no. 19, October 23, 1907, 3.

<sup>57</sup>Iyothee Thass, "Sangaittelivu," *The Tamilian* VI, no. 46, (April 23, 1913), 3.

<sup>58</sup>Iyothee Thass, "Taali Kattinaalmattum Vivaakampolum," *The Tamilian* II, no. 27, December 16, 1908, 3–4.

<sup>59</sup>Thass, "Taali," 3–4. Here Iyer refers to a brahmin second name while Mudali, Chetty, and Naidu refer to non-brahmin upper caste second names. All these castes maintain endogamy and exclusionary differences among themselves often combine their power to subordinate Tamils they marginalize as untouchables. This

also shows that while Tamil Buddhists such as Sagodari and Thass took on brahmin power uncompromisingly, they did not hesitate to critique the perniciousness of non-brahmin caste groups such as *Mudaliyars* and others who thrived because of and only under the structures and practices of casteism.

<sup>60</sup>Thass, "Taali," 3–4.

<sup>61</sup>Caste murder of brahmin and non-brahmin privileged communities' women for their relationships with Dalit men remains an unexamined field in modern Indian history. But recent data shows an increase in such violence against and caste murder of Dalits. See R. Arivanantham, "Dalit Colonies Face Mob Fury in Dharmapuri," *The Hindu*, last modified June 22, 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/3-dalit-colonies-face-mob-fury-in-dharmapuri/article4076539.ece>.

<sup>62</sup>Iyothee Thass, "Sangaittelivu," *The Tamilian* VII, no. 37, February 18, 1914, 2.

<sup>63</sup>Iyothee Thass, "Who is Responsible for the Fallen Condition of the Women of India? It is the Men Themselves," *The Tamilian* VI, no. 4, July 3, 1912, 3.

<sup>64</sup>Thass, "Who is Responsible," 3.

<sup>65</sup>L. P. C. Arokiasawmy Pillay, "Penn Kalvi," *The Tamilian* IV, no. 31, January 11, 1911, 3–4.

<sup>66</sup>For details, see Krishnamurthy Alamelu Geetha, "From Panchamars to Dalit," *Prose Studies* 33, no. 2 (2011): 117–131.

<sup>67</sup>See Geetha, "Periyar," 185.

<sup>68</sup>See Dorothy M. Figueira, *Aryans, Jews, Brahmins* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); C. J. Fuller and Haripriya Narasimhan, *Tamil Brahmins: The Making of a Middle-Class Caste* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); and Rupa Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion, and the Social in Modern India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

<sup>69</sup>For a historical analysis of "Dalit feminism" and "Dalit Bahujan feminism," see Paik, "Who Is My Ally?"

<sup>70</sup>Gopal Guru, "Dalit Women," 2549. For more a recent and detailed critique of Dalit patriarchies, see Paik, "Who Is My Ally?"

<sup>71</sup>Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*, 14.