

**Inequality in Education:
Journalistic Descriptions from Ayyothidhasa Pandithar's
Oru Paisa Tamilan and *Tamilan* Magazines**

M. Balasubramaniyan, M.A. and R. Subramani, Ph.D.

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Ayyothidhasapandithar (1845 – 1914)

Courtesy: <http://ayyothidhasapandithar.blogspot.com/2010/10/>

Introduction

Concomitant to the evolution of the human species, the philosophy of teaching and learning has been formulating itself. Both members of ethnic groups and a number of communities have given serious thinking to this issue. Evidences could be unearthed in relation to this line of thinking among Vedic Brahmins and Jain monks. Through Tamil literature, we understand that poets have been knowledgeable and were operating in this area of education. As in the Greek and Celtic societies and as what prevailed in the Dravidian tradition, Tamil culture was impregnated with noble thinking in education. Though kings had explicit plans to take education to common man across the spectrum, it was the British who implemented equity in access to education, when division in every name existed. Ayyothidhasa pandithar was a doyen among who supported the cause of the subaltern people for their holistic development.

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Ayyothidhasa pandithar as a Reformer, Educationist, Supporter of the Oppressed and Buddhist Revivalist

Researchers identify Ayyothidhasa pandithar as a revivalist of Bhuddhist philosophy after Asoka, by starting *Oru Paisa Tamilan* in 1907 and providing a Tamil identity. Although he juggled subjects like Politics, Culture and Tamil medicine, he handled education with great zeal and assurance. He stressed the significance of both western and modern education. By imparting education through the mother tongue, literature and epics, he argued, progressive ideas could be easily disseminated. Dogmatic beliefs against mother tongue education were regressive, he argued. The oppressed, he insisted, should seek modern education. As an example he allowed his children to study go through modern education. He implemented modern education in the schools he started with the help of Col. Olcott. He stressed vocational education for women and believed that education was for the overall development of the society and not aimed at self-perpetuation (Gowtham Channa, 2007).



Oru Paisa Tamilan, 3 July 1907

Courtesy: <http://ayyothidhasapandithar.blogspot.com/2009/03/102.html>

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There should be reservation for the downtrodden in schools and colleges, as well as in employment. He argued for monetary help to the downtrodden through scholars when they go to schools and colleges. These were among the ten resolutions or demands of Ayyothidhasa pandithar sent to Ragavachari in the year 1891 during the Nilgris conclave (*ibid*). *Oru Paisa Tamilan* and *Tamilan* journals reveal Ayyothidhasa pandithar's social, political, religious, historical and literary discourses apart from his demand for education for the downtrodden.

Ayyothidhasar's Contribution to Early Educational Ventures

Dalit leaders and the missionaries opined that the emancipation of the oppressed would happen only through education. Adopting similar line of thinking, the British drafted plans and formed the Education Commission in 1882 and undertook a survey of social status of the *Panchamas*. This identified the reasons for their economic stagnation. Changes were brought about in education policy in February 1893 and a two-rupee scholarship to those from oppressed community was awarded. Special schools for them were opened in areas where their population was high.

Ayyothidhasar convened a Nilgiri conference in 1891 to integrate the Dalits into Dravida Mahajana Sabha. He passed ten resolutions stressing the need for education to Dalits and the related rights and subsidies. There should be separate schools for Dalits and teachers from among them; half fee concession for untouchables; scholarships for those students who are successful in matriculation examination; for those who completed schooling, employment should be given in each of the government departments based on their educational qualifications and good conduct without any hindrance.

Demand for Temple Entry

In April 1892, Chennai Mahajana Sabha meeting was held in Victoria Mahal. Participating as a representative of the Nilgiri Mahajana Sabha, Ayyothidhasar demanded entry of Dalits in Saiva and Vaishnava temples but this was strongly rebutted by caste Hindus. Retaliating to this, he demanded schools in every village to provide free education to Dalits and rejected caste. Swiftly heeding to the demands, the British government ordered setting up of Dalit schools in villages and directed the Local Fund Board to provide assistance in the process. Many Dalit children benefited from this and schools came up in Chennai, Chengalpattu and Travancore.

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Opposing the *Panchama* Nomenclature

Theosophical Society started by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Col. H.S.Olcott in 1894 started *Panchama* free schools, possible because of the acquaintance of Rev. John Ratnam, Rettamalai Sreenivasan with Lord Olcott. But, Ayyothidhasar did not relish this nomenclature. The name carried the stigma of caste Hindus and desired a more egalitarian name like secular free school. Seeking the opinions of the caste Hindus to name the schools for the downtrodden was like feeding the Brahmin's fire with ghee and adding spice to their curry (Venkatachalam, 2015). Aided by the British government, and assisted by missionaries, Ayyothidhasar carried forward Dalit education as his mission towards development.

Ayyothidhasar's Educational Philosophy

Ayyothidhasar's educational philosophy was intended not only to provide Dalits education but it was also a comprehensive discourse on the modalities of how to move forward from oppression to freedom and equality of castes. Though his *Oru Paisa Tamilan* and *Tamilian* volumes he had persistently carried on a campaign for Dalit education. Only education could lead the individual and the society to social emancipation, and this reason was upper most in Ayyothidhasar's program (Anbu Ponnaiyam, 2010). Education leads to social development. Ayyothidhasar was steadfast in obtaining free education to the economically deprived labouring poor (Vijayakumar, 2015). His alliance with Col. Olcott enabled him to travel to Sri Lanka and embrace Bhuddism. Besides education for the downtrodden, he also worked for midday meals, scholarship assistance and employment to the students from Dalit communities (*ibid*).

While noting his contribution to education, Venkatachalam (2015) mentions that Ayyothidhasar desired uniform curriculum through mother tongue and vocational education which would contribute to both individual and societal development. Through such arrangements, scientific advancement would hasten overall growth and prosperity and the educational system would bring in a congenial atmosphere. All his writings pointed to this possible realization of development through education. Education should be streamlined for enabling industrial and agricultural development (*ibid*).

Methodology

Content analysis is an unobtrusive tool to bring out the meaning behind the text and situate them to the context in which it was generated. Hence, qualitative content analysis was performed to understand the multi dimensional writings on education by Ayyothidhasar through the columns of the magazines he edited and published. Since Ayyothidhasar's writing on education was the focal area, only those articles that spoke about the discriminatory practices inside the classroom were taken up for the study.

Journalistic Descriptions in *Oru Paisa Tamilan* and *Tamilan*

Indian society reveals caste fissures in several ways. Caste is seen entangled with politics, arts, culture, food, clothing, avocation, living focus and spirituality. It is no wonder that we have historical evidence from classrooms on the presence of caste discrimination. During Vedic age, Dalits and Sudras were proscribed from learning which persisted for centuries without being subjected to closer scrutiny. In the name of norms and values, discrimination was justified and this percolated down to teachers as well. This was evident even in the appointment of education commissioners appointed by government to oversee educational administration. This was published in an article, titled 'Primary schools and supervisors' in *Tamilian* (1909) issue. The article read like this: "Supervisors who should visit village schools and examine the students, never undertake such visits. Instead they bring children to a place like a farmhouse of a caste Hindu and file a report that they have examined the students. This act shows how discriminatory they have been in keeping Dalit children at a distance and completes the examination process for namesake".

The supervisors have avoided undertaking visits to such places and did not go anyway near the Dalit children. In order to end this practice those who treat children as children should occupy such offices. The rest of the article goes like this: "The very purpose of appointing such officers is defeated and incurring additional expenditure is like precious resources being flushed away down the drain. Those who treat human beings empathetically, those who are equanimous and are selfless without avarice should be appointed supervisors in order to educate the downtrodden and carry forward the government mission of educating the oppressed (*Tamilian*, January 1909). This news item clearly brings to the fore the prevalent caste discrimination among government officers in those days.

There was one more news item that discussed how caste Hindus indulged in such nefarious practices. They have cut across religion to join hands with them to retain caste structure. Dravidians with lesser or no caste affiliations were progressing well. They were accused by the divisive caste forces that these people were enjoying the benefits by the benevolence of missionaries. Hence, they entered into Lutheran mission and brought in caste division in Christianity (Tamilan, 27 January 1909).

When education was denied to Dalits, missionaries came to their rescue and attempted to provide equitable education by establishing educational institutions and appointing teachers for that purpose. As Dalits were admitted in these schools, caste Hindus cited this as a reason to stop sending their children to learn sitting side by side with Dalits. To record this phenomenon, Ayyothidhasar, in March 17th edition of *Tamilan* in 1909, published a story of the missionaries' mercy thus:

The missionaries have mercifully opened schools wherein children from all hues will be admitted. Hence caste Hindus did not send their children to those schools. In public places like schools, they were particular that their children should not be sitting equal to Dalits. The missionaries did not pay any heed to this and the news was published as below “Even if one Dalit student wants to join school, we will throw open all the gates for him/ her, even it entails stopping 100 caste Hindu students from entering school. This reply forced Hindu students to sit and study with *Pariahs* (Tamilan, 17 March 1909).

The way British implemented education policy without discrimination to include Dalits and later provide them employment opportunity was published in *Tamilan* as follows: “Although oppressed at the hands of caste Hindus, the secular administration ensured that children of Dravidians were able to secure BA, MA degrees like that of the upper caste. Recognising these attainments, the British government appointed them in *sereusadar*, *Ajirserusadar*, *honorary surgeon*, *honorary magistrate* and *school magistrate* posts and after discharging the duties with great commitment, they earned the titles of Star of India, Rao Bahadur.” Even during English administration of schools, discriminatory practices were in full swing as depicted by news items in *Tamilan*'s issues.

Conclusion

Ayyothidhasar carried forward a mission for secular, equitable and emancipatory education based on scientific thinking when there was no possibility for education for all and right to equal opportunity was not yet campaigned by civil societies. It is very insightful of Ayyothidhasar to have propagated individual education for the larger social development. Ayyothidhasar pitched also for women education, education through one's mother tongue, vocational training and modern education. There was no scope for Dalits to sit next to caste Hindus in school. There were orchestrated attempts to deny employment opportunities for the Dalits. All these and how casteism was prevalent in the classrooms were evident from the articles published by Ayyothidhasar in *Tamilan's* issues. This paper documented how historically inequality persisted.

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M. Balasubramaniyan, Ph.D. Scholar
Department of Journalism and Mass Communication
Periyar University
Saalm – 636011
Tamil Nadu
India
balaktv1973@gmail.com

R. Subramani. Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Journalism and Mass Communication

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Periyar University
Saelm – 636011
Tamil Nadu
India
erasubramani@gmail.com