

Between the Global and Regional: Asia in the Tamil Buddhist Imagination

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Abstract

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Madras became home to a movement that anticipated Ambedkar's turn to Buddhism by nearly half a century. Founded in 1898, the Sakya Buddhist Society was led by Iyothee Thass (1845–1914) and became the first Dalit Buddhist revival of its kind in late colonial India. In this article, I explore the global dimensions of Sakya Buddhism through an intertextual reading of its journal, *Oru Paica Tamilan*, and the work of Asian Buddhists like Henry Olcott and Anagarika Dharmapala who were associated with the movement. I argue that Sakya Buddhism's historical imaginaire of Dalits as indigenous Buddhists intersected with the political concerns that drove Asian Buddhist revivalist movements in important ways. I also show that the movement created a distinctly Tamil tradition of Buddhism for Dalits and attempted to reorient them towards the broader Buddhist world even as they had a notionally marginal presence within this landscape. In doing so, I propose the category of 'pararegional' as a way of thinking about seemingly uneven or unidirectional interactions between different spatial scales such as 'global' and 'regional.'

Keywords

Iyothee Thass, anticaste movements, Dalit Buddhism, colonial India, Asia, global history

Introduction

In the nineteenth century, British India and several parts of Asia witnessed calls for the revival of Buddhism in what was as much a religious endeavour as it was a political one. European imperialism had an important role to play in this development since cultural, intellectual, and political interactions within the Asian Buddhist world were

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not only shaped by established circuits of movement from premodern times but also by decidedly contemporaneous circumstances. Modern-day Buddhism is commonly understood to be a “cocreation of Asians, Europeans, and Americans” and several scholars such as David McMahan have argued that nineteenth century Asian Buddhist revival movements were premised on Asian engagements with modernity and anticolonial contestations of European imperialism (McMahan, 2009, p. 6). In Japan, for instance, the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate and the establishment of Meiji rule in the mid-nineteenth century precipitated “the most violent suppression of Buddhism in Japanese history,” which compelled the Buddhist community to turn to America, Europe, and elsewhere in Asia and look for ways of reconstructing a Buddhism that would succeed under the new political regime (Jaffe, 2019, p. 20). In Ceylon, on the other hand, British imperialism and Christian missionisation were the main catalysts for a Buddhist revival. The absence of a Buddhist ruler in Ceylon since the removal of the last Kandyan king by the British in the early nineteenth century contributed to the sense that Buddhism had become weak on the island (Blackburn, 2010, p. 143). In addition, the influence of Christian missionaries and the persistence of caste-based divisions within Buddhist *nikayas* provided further impetus for a Sinhalese Buddhist revival (Amunugama, 2019, pp. 62–69; Prothero, 1996, p. 95).^{1,2}

Besides this, economic developments like the growth of new commercial networks and improvements in communication and transportation also influenced the nature of movement within the nineteenth century Asian Buddhist world. The contours of Buddhist pilgrimage, for instance, were shaped by the development of transportation networks in important ways. In the nineteenth century, Buddhist sites like Sravasti, Vaisali, and Lumbini remained somewhat overlooked while other sites like Bodh Gaya and Sarnath attracted large numbers of pilgrims from outside the subcontinent because of the easy access that railway lines provided to these places (D. F. Ober, 2016, pp. 165–166). In effect, the idea that the modern Buddhist world was shaped by “extensive interactions and interconnections across a variety of national, ethnic, cultural and colonial boundaries” has become historiographical common sense (Turner et al., 2013, p. 2).³

In contrast, much of the existing scholarship on the modern Buddhist revival in late colonial India has tended to overlook the broader global context that framed this revival. In social histories of anticaste politics, Babasaheb Ambedkar’s formal initiation into Buddhism in 1956 is often taken to be the starting point of a flourishing Dalit ‘neo-Buddhism’ although this movement’s relationship with the broader

¹ In this context, the Sanskrit-Pali term *nikaya* refers to a monastic order within the Ceylonese or Sri Lankan Buddhist clergy rather than the foundational collection of Buddhist scripture known by the same name.

² Transliterations of all non-English words other than proper nouns are italicised. Transliterations of Tamil words, except commonly-used terms such as Dravida, follow the Madras Lexicon. Diacritics are completely omitted.

³ Jaffe (2019, p. 67) theorises these interconnections as “complex global loops;” Blackburn (2010, p. 210) uses the term “locative pluralism” to describe the multiple affiliations that Asian Buddhists navigated in the nineteenth century; McMahan (2009, p. 6) argues that Buddhist modernism was “not the exclusive product of one geographic or cultural setting.”

landscape of Asian Buddhism has, with some exceptions (Queen, 2002), scarcely received sustained scholarly attention. Nearly half a century earlier, Iyothee Thass's movement was similarly shaped by its interaction with Asian and western interlocutors in a foundational period of global Buddhist revival that laid the groundwork for Ambedkar's turn to Buddhism in the mid-twentieth century. Yet, Iyothee Thass's movement remains relatively understudied and its global dimensions even further neglected in the historiography of anticaste politics and Buddhism in modern India. This article adds to the small body of scholarship on Iyothee Thass and Sakya Buddhism by addressing two sets of historiography that have so far remained separate: first, the extensive body of literature on caste and anticaste thought in the Tamil south and second, studies of Asian and western Buddhist revival in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

One of the key problematics of studying the global dimensions of a socially- and culturally-rooted movement like Sakya Buddhism is that it occupied a marginal position in the landscape of Asian Buddhism within which it was located. This is because the Sakya Buddhist movement was resolutely Tamil in its intellectual and social character so that even as it spread to other parts of the subcontinent and beyond, its membership and influence were limited to the Tamil public sphere and the movement never acquired a 'global' or 'translocal' character in that sense. Through a close reading of historical imaginaires produced by Iyothee Thass and his Asian Buddhist interlocutors, this article proposes the category of 'pararegional' as a way of understanding the seemingly uneven or unidirectional interactions between global and regional sociocultural spheres. To that end, the article begins with an overview of Iyothee Thass's early life and his encounter with Olcott to locate Sakya Buddhism within the Asian Buddhist world. As we will see, Olcott's pan-Asian ambitions of Buddhist revival shaped Sakya Buddhism in important ways. This is followed by an intertextual reading of Iyothee Thass's work and his Asian Buddhist interlocutors whereby Sakya Buddhism's embeddedness in the Tamil print and public sphere is analysed in conjuncture with the movement's interest in the world beyond the Tamil south. The article concludes with a reflection on the category of 'pararegional' as a way of understanding the structure and extent of interactions between different spatial scales like 'global' and 'regional.'

Sakya Buddhism in Asia

By the late nineteenth century, the social world of the Tamil south was marked by the influence of colonial modernity. The East India Company's entrenchment in south India at the turn of the eighteenth century, visible not only in administrative and revenue arrangements but also in broader social and cultural changes, shaped the political sphere of this region in important ways. Dalit labour and Dalits themselves were at the heart of the colonial institutional edifice since the existence of a land surplus and the labour-intensive nature of crops cultivated in the Tamil south made control over labour central to agrarian production (Viswanath, 2014, p. 24). Most agrarian labourers were almost exclusively drawn from Untouchable castes so that

caste names like *Paraiyar* and *Pallar* were practically interchangeable with categories of agrarian labour such as *patiyal* and *pannaiyal* which indicated various kinds of wage classifications for landless peasants. In addition, their servitude was enforced through hereditary bondage agreements called *al-ataimanam* or man-mortgage, landlessness, violence, untouchability, and economic conditions like landlord monopoly over the means of production and an enforced lack of alternative work for Dalit labourers (Ibid., pp. 28–32). Although landowners or *mirasidars* were frequently at odds with colonial officials and their drive to increase revenue demand, both these groups were dependent on the agrarian labour on which the accumulation of surplus was predicated and by extension, both were implicated in the enforced servitude of Dalit labourers (Irschick, 1994, pp. 135–141).⁴

Iyothee Thass emerged as an advocate for Dalits within this social context in the 1870s, arguing that they were *Adi Dravidas* or original inhabitants of the land and ought to be counted as non-Hindus in the census. Not much is known about Iyothee Thass's early life except that he was born in Coimbatore as Kathavarayan and took the name of his teacher before moving to the Nilgiris region, where he practiced as a *Siddha* physician for several decades.⁵ Thass became politically active through his encounter with Dalit communities during this time (Aloysius, 1998, p. 50) and several key motifs of his political life are visible in these initial years, which dovetailed broader social, cultural, and political developments of this period. The influence of missionaries in the Tamil south, for instance, provoked many well-known debates about untouchability and religious conversion in the Tamil public sphere since castes like the Paraiyars were among the first to embrace Christianity (Balachandran, 2008; Viswanath, 2014, pp. 40–70). Thass was evidently concerned with the question of Dalit religious identity early on and founded a religious organisation in 1870 to oppose Christian proselytisation and explore the emancipatory possibilities of Hinduism for caste subalterns. He was also involved in the emergent print culture of the Tamil south through the periodical *Dravida Pantiyam*, which he founded a few years before establishing the *Dravida Mahajana Sabha* in 1891 as a political platform for Paraiyars. Thass's early engagement with print culture and with questions of religious identity and political representation became central to the Buddhist revival that he later went on to lead. His initial turn to Buddhism, however, was occasioned by a chance encounter with Henry Olcott when he helped to organise the first Olcott Panchama Schools that had started to provide free education to Madras's Dalit children from the 1890s (Aloysius, 1998, pp. 54–55).

Popularly known as 'The White Buddhist,' Olcott was an American journalist and lawyer who briefly served in the US military during the American Civil War. His interest in Buddhism, Hinduism, and occult practices brought him from New York to Bombay in 1879 and to Madras the following year, where he established the headquarters of the Theosophical Society along with Helena Blavatsky. From

⁴ I use Dalit caste names like Paraiyar only for the sake of historical specificity and like Rupa Viswanath (2014, pp. xi–xii), prefer the term Dalit when writing in my own voice.

⁵ The Sanskrit-Tamil term *siddha* here refers to a traditional system of medicine with origins in ancient south India. See Weiss, 2009.

the beginning, Olcott cast a wide net in his search for allies who would champion a Buddhist revival and his visits to Ceylon and Japan cemented his position as a leading interlocutor for Buddhism in Asia and the West. Stephen Prothero (1996, p. 97) notes that Olcott left as a “folk hero” after his first tour of Ceylon in 1880, a trip during which he formally became Buddhist, met leading Ceylonese monks, delivered lectures, and established the Buddhist Theosophical Society as well as numerous Buddhist schools. The following year, Olcott published a text called “The Buddhist Catechism” that brought him recognition as an authoritative interpreter of Buddhism, so much so that the Theosophical Society’s journal reported a few months later that the book was not only cited by a lawyer in court but also accepted by the presiding judge in a dispute concerning the possession of a temple in Ceylon (‘Buddhist Catechism - A Note’, 1881, p. 24).⁶

A few years later, Olcott was invited to Japan by lay Buddhist notables who wanted him to “come and do for Buddhism in Japan the same thing which he has done for Buddhism in Ceylon” (‘Off to Japan’, 1889, p. 265). He was accompanied on this trip by the young Sinhalese monk Anagarika Dharmapala, who went on to become the father of anticolonialism and Buddhist revival in Ceylon. Olcott’s tour of Japan was important for several reasons, not least because he announced his ambition to bring together Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism under his campaign for a “United Buddhist World.” Even more significantly, he laid down a decisive vision for Buddhism’s role on the world stage at a public meeting in Kyoto:

We have these two things to do. In Buddhist countries, to revive our religion... And then, it is our duty - as taught us by Lord Buddha himself - to send teachers and preachers to distant lands, such as Europe and America, to tell the millions now disbelieving Christianity...[that they will] satisfy their heart in Buddhism. If I can persuade you to join your hands with your brothers in Ceylon and elsewhere, I shall think I am seeing the dawn of a more glorious day for Buddhism. (‘The President’s Japanese Tour’, 1889, p. lxiv–lxv).

Olcott’s call for pan-Asian Buddhist solidarity shaped Iyothee Thass’s project of Buddhist revival from the very beginning. When Thass wrote to Olcott asking for his support to establish a Buddhist society in Madras, for instance, the latter responded by inviting Anagarika Dharmapala and the Japanese monk Kenzo Gunaratne to preside over a public meeting where the Dalits’ claim to an ancient Buddhist past was presented in an open petition. As Olcott (1898) wrote in the Theosophical Society’s journal, “They were convinced, from a study of Tamil literature, that their ancestors were of the Dravidian race and Buddhist...Their earnest wish now was to revert to it, and they looked to me, as a friend of the wretched, to tell them what to do and help them to make the start.” Olcott then forwarded the petition to leaders of the Ceylonese Buddhist Sangha and arranged for Thass and P. Krishnaswamy, a teacher in the first Olcott Free School, to travel to Ceylon as representatives of Tamil Dalits. While there,

⁶ Prothero (1996, p. 101) also notes that *The Buddhist Catechism* went through forty editions and was translated into more than twenty languages and is still used in Sri Lankan schools.

both Thass and Krishnaswamy took the *pancasila* or Five Precepts in a ceremony that marked their formal initiation into Buddhism. They spent a few days meeting with senior monks in Colombo and Kandy before returning to Madras and establishing the Sakya Buddhist Society in 1898 (Aloysius, 1998, pp. 51–53). From its inception, therefore, Sakya Buddhism was in contact with a network of Buddhist figures, practices, and ideas from different parts of Asia and this shaped the movement's intellectual character in crucial ways.

Reading Sakya Buddhism

Much of what we know about Sakya Buddhism comes from the periodical *Oru Paica Tamilan* which was published by Thass from 1907 onwards. *Tamilan* is perhaps one of the few Tamil Dalit journals from the colonial period to have survived, mostly through personal collections that have not fully made their way into institutional or state archives. This is quite remarkable since as many as forty-two Tamil journals were published by Dalits between 1850 and 1947 (Balasubramaniam, 2020), which points to a history of material and historiographical erasure as well as the ability of anticaste radicals to appropriate print culture for their own political ends. For instance, the establishment of Fort St. George as the seat of British control in south India led to the development of the 'Madras School of Orientalism' which contributed to the "systematic recovery, publication, and public recognition" of classical Tamil literature as Tamil became a subject of study in emerging disciplines like philology, history, and archaeology (Ebeling, 2010, p. 22; Trautmann, 2009). Not only did this allow Thass to articulate a critique of the principles of caste embedded in classical religious texts but he was also able to reread the canon creatively and construct a distinctively Tamil Buddhist tradition for Dalits. In effect, Sakya Buddhism's appropriation of print culture to intervene in the Tamil public sphere meant that this sphere in turn shaped the movement's fundamentally Tamil character.

Anticaste engagements with print are immensely important for several reasons: first, they contest the dominance of caste Hindus and other elites in print culture and second, they not only offer vital critiques of caste but also unsettle other dominant constructs such as nation, class, and patriarchy in a colonial context where these were often central to anticolonial mobilisation. In keeping with the vast body of literature on Dalit vernacular and print cultures in colonial India, Iyothee Thass's engagement with the print medium and his marked preference for print journalism rather than the book have been studied extensively for its role in the creation of an anticaste readerly public (Aloysius, 2011; Jayanth, 2019; Kandasamy, 2008; Leonard, 2017, 2021). Yet much of the scholarship on Sakya Buddhism carries an overwhelming and narrow focus on its location within the Tamil print and public sphere. For instance, G. Aloysius's (1998, *passim*.) account of Sakya Buddhism takes note of the movement's interest in, and interaction with, the Asian Buddhist world but makes no attempts to theorise these connections in a systematic way. The rich body of scholarship and commentary on Sakya Buddhism published in Tamil over the last two decades has similarly neglected its interaction with the Asian Buddhist world, instead analysing the movement through

familiar themes of caste, colonial rule, and nationalism (Ponnovium, 1999) or engaging in a hermeneutic reading of Iyothee Thass's work through the frameworks of textual studies and political theory (Dharmaraj, 2019; Gauthaman, 1993, 2021; Rajangam, 2008). In somewhat of an exception to this trend, Gajendran Ayyathurai (2011, p. 216) does note that Thass's understanding of Buddhism was "transnational" and revealed "an openness to other 'nations' and cultures" but he does not delineate the nature, structure, or extent of this transnational aspect of Sakya Buddhism. This is also true of several other studies that detail the translocal and global engagements of movements like Sakya Buddhism but do not offer a theoretical account of how these engagements were structured and what we may learn about the nature of interactions between global and regional spheres through them (Ayyathurai, 2020; Balasubramaniam, 2016; Gauthaman, 2004). As we have seen, Sakya Buddhism was oriented towards a broader world beyond the Tamil south even as it remained grounded in the Tamil cultural context and this fine balance between its global engagements and regional embeddedness is especially evident in the movement's intellectual project, which we will now consider.

Much like the political circumstances of its formation, Sakya Buddhism's interpretation of the caste question was global in scope even in the initial period of its existence. Take, for instance, this essay titled "Mockery of the Poor" (*Elaikalin Ekkalattoni*) published in Tamilan in 1909:

In the world's eyes, the poor in the populations of many continents (*parpala kantankalilulla makkalul elaikal*) are lazy, lacking in intelligence, and uninterested in learning, and so wander around in poverty. In this country where the dharma of Indra, that is Buddha, has flourished, the indigenous people (*purvakutikal*) who followed Indra's dharma have become impoverished despite being industrious and having skill, intelligence, and zeal...The intelligentsia and the elite pay no heed to the poor of this country, just as in other continents (*marrakantankalilulla elaikalaiippo*)...[but] in this country, those who keep caste are honourable, and the casteless Buddhists who toil are poor, and they [the Buddhist Dalits] are oppressed under the deceitful garb of caste and the duplicitous clamour of religion each day. (Thass, 1999, pp. 592–594)

The idea that untouchability came to be institutionalised and Dalits were enslaved because of their affiliation with Buddhism in the context of the Buddha's contestation of Brahmanism in the early historical period is well-known in the anticaste tradition, most famously iterated by Ambedkar (1948, reproduced in Moon, 1979, vol. 7, pp. 311–355) four decades later. Departing from Ambedkar's emphasis on the role of beef consumption in the institutionalisation of untouchability, Thass contended that Dalits were an indigenous people of Buddhist faith who were deceitfully defeated by Aryan Brahmins in the course of their invasion of ancient south India and thereafter enslaved as Untouchables. The idea of Dalits as indigenous Dravidians (*purvakutikal*) clearly owed much to racial theories of difference between 'Aryans' and 'Dravidians' popularised by famous Madras Orientalists, as Ayyathurai (2011, p. 48) has noted. But more importantly, the Dalit claim to indigeneity served to underscore their alienation

from land in the predominantly agrarian context of Dalit servitude in the nineteenth and early twentieth century Tamil south, as we have seen. Further, the spatial coordinates of Thass's anticaste critique were evidently global in their very conception so that the peculiarly Indian institution of caste was not just a question of social and political salience within India but a crucial and shameful marker of difference between India and the rest of the world. Thass's historical imaginaire therefore weaves a narrative that speaks to the specific and regionally-rooted conditions of marginalisation experienced by Dalits in the Tamil south while also contextualising that marginalisation in a global frame.

In extending its conception of the Dalit Buddhist past to a global frame of reference, Sakya Buddhism converged with Asian Buddhist revival impulses in important ways. Take, for instance, the following excerpt from one of Thass's most prominent texts, "A History of Indra's Country" (*Intira Teca Carittiram*), a serialised account of India's past that appeared in the columns of *Tamilan* between 1910 and 1911:

In the past, this country was also called the subcontinent of Bharat because in antiquity, the people of this country celebrated Prince Siddharta as the propitious one...the country that celebrated him [thus] was named north and south India...Throughout north India (*vatayinittiyamennum*), and from central Asia (*aciya mattiya kantamutal*) to the farthest end of south India (*tenintiya kataikoti varai*), Buddhist rulers endowed Buddhist Sanghas, disseminated the true dharma, instituted justice, ruled with kindness, saved other rulers from ruin as one of their own, and extended peace and goodwill to halt the growth of endless conflict...(Ka. *Ayottitasa Pantitar Cintanaikal*, 1999, pp. 15–23)

M.S.S. Pandian (2007, p. 109) has noted that Thass's readings of the past were marked by "ingenious and idiosyncratic interpretation of etymology, and remarkable flights of imagination," and nowhere is this more evident than in this text. Thass consistently uses chronological phrases like "in the past" (*purvam*) and "in antiquity" (*atiyil*) which, as Sumathi Ramaswamy (2000, p. 582) notes, mark "fantasy's resistance to a time-conscious disciplinary History." Thass then claims a Buddhist provenance for India by suggesting that the Buddha was known as Indra (*intirar*), from which the land of his birth (*intiya*) and its people (*intiyarkal*) derive their name, because he conquered the five senses (*aimporikalai venra tirattal*). Similarly, the play on the word *varatar* (divine or propitious one) to suggest a Buddhist genealogy for India (*paratam*) at once writes Dalits back into the origin myth of the country. Ancient India as *intira tecam* therefore appears here as a casteless Buddhist land to which Dalits can claim primeval ties of belonging and emerge as agentive historical subjects.

Much of this is a familiar line of reasoning in critiques of caste and Hinduism (Ramaswamy, 1997, pp. 24–34) but where this text breaks new ground is in its distinctly Tamil genealogy of Dalit Buddhism and its simultaneous conception of Buddhism as a world religion. This is especially notable in light of Ambedkar's foundational text, "The Buddha and His Dhamma," which does not mention the spread or presence of Buddhism outside the subcontinent and only makes one tangential reference to Ceylon and Burma while taking note of diverse interpretations of *ahimsa* within Buddhism

(Ambedkar, 1957, reproduced in Moon, 1979, vol. 11, p. 345). Sakya Buddhism, in contrast, evinces a keen sense of geography in its historical imaginaire so that it conceives of Buddhism as a world religion and delineates Buddhism's global presence by naming particular continents (*kantam*) and realms or countries (*tecam, natu*). The use of these precise spatial markers is interesting, not because it speaks to a period in which it is natural to read nations and nationalisms back into the past but because it creates a world-historical role for ancient Buddhist India that explains the distinct nature of India's caste-induced impoverishment compared to the rest of the world. This implicit distinction between India and the rest of the world was important in the nineteenth century because it informed the Asian Buddhist world's interest in the revival of Indian Buddhism and formed the basis of Sakya Buddhism's continuous contact with Asian Buddhist figures. Sakya Buddhism's deliberate deployment of this distinction and by extension, its participation in the broader revivalist discourse of this period, is evident in the fact that it articulated Buddhism's appeal not only with reference to its casteless-ness but also with reference to its intellectual and cultural contributions to the world. Therefore, even in essays that were not part of texts like *Intira Teca Carittiram* which explicitly aimed to read Buddhism through the lens of caste, Thass conceptualised Buddhism as a notable world-historical phenomenon in its own right:

Let us consider the development of medicine in India: so long as Buddhist viharas were present (*pautta viyarankal niraintirunta varaiyil*), enlightened men and Sramana monks were able to steer clear of laziness, deceit, falsehood, and jealousy and instead spend time honing their skills and knowledge for the benefit of humankind and all living things (*manumakkalukkum marrum civaracikalukkum*)...Historically, we see that the Arabians (*arepiya tecattor*) and several rulers such as Solomon (*calomon mutaliya aracarkalum*) heard of the intellectual accomplishments of India and came here to learn about the different branches of medicine...(Thass, 1999, p. 7)

Consider the intertextual resonances between this expansively global conception of Buddhism ("for the benefit of humankind and all living beings") and similar notions of Buddhism's world-historical significance in the work of prominent Asian Buddhists like Anagarika Dharmapala, whom we encountered briefly as Olcott's Ceylonese interlocuter. Dharmapala is known for his importance in the modern religious and political history of Ceylon but as Steven Kemper (2014) has noted, his legacy cannot be understood without considering his involvement in movements like Theosophy and Pan-Asianism which attempted to position Buddhism as a world religion of global appeal. That Dharmapala was influential in the Asian Buddhist world became evident early on when he was chosen to represent Theravada Buddhism at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, which was also the occasion of Vivekananda's famous speech as a representative of Hinduism. To that end, Dharmapala persistently foregrounded the question of reviving Buddhism in India as a way of soliciting support for a pan-Asian Buddhist revival and India consequently acquired a central role in the Asian Buddhist world. For instance, one of Dharmapala's cherished projects was the restoration of the

Bodh Gaya temple to Buddhist possession and he established an influential institution called the Maha Bodhi Society as well as a journal that circulated widely within the Asian Buddhist world.⁷ In addition, Dharmapala travelled widely within Asia and the west to secure support for his project. When he approached the ruler of Siam, for instance, Dharmapala (1965, p. 332) argued that if Buddhists were to reclaim Bodh Gaya, it would “be a silent religious revolution and the twentieth century will see Buddhism in the land of its birth...and the historian would record this triumphant success which was accomplished in the illustrious reign of His Gracious Majesty Chulalongkorn, King of Siam.”

In essay after essay and speech after speech published in the Maha Bodhi journal, including those of Thass and Ambedkar, India’s ancient prominence and contemporary decline became the central plot of the Asian Buddhist revival in ways that echoed Sakya Buddhism’s conception of the caste question. Consider, for instance, Dharmapala’s public lecture at the Town Hall in New York which was sponsored by a local Sinhala restaurateur named K.Y. Kira. In his remarks, Dharmapala (1925, reproduced in Ahir, 1995, pp. 14–15) discussed Buddhism’s decay in the modern world and noted by way of example that “the Indian Brahmans cling to caste and treat with contempt the two hundred millions of non-Brahmans.” He then concluded by recounting Buddhism’s glorious past and made a case for the need to revitalise its existence in contemporary times:

The Buddhist missionaries of India civilised Asia 2000 years ago. They went to distant lands and taught them agriculture, weaving, painting, sculpture, horticulture, floriculture, architecture, hygiene, aesthetic arts, social etiquette, philosophy, psychology, music; and the civilisation that was purely Aryan spread in Tibet, China, Japan, Burma, Siam, Ceylon, etc...When the early Buddhist Bhikkus went forth to distant lands to preach the Good Law they went relying on the power of Righteousness...[and these] distant lands were brought under the Good Law of the Compassionate One not with the help of gunboats, but by the power of love of self-sacrificing Bhikkus who led virtuous lives...(ibid., pp. 8–15)

As we see here, the emphasis on Buddhism’s global imprint in the world as well as India’s central role in the emergence and spread of Buddhism was common to both Thass and Dharmapala and this remained true even after Dharmapala lost the lawsuit he filed to redirect the custodianship of the Bodh Gaya temple to Buddhists. As late as 1916, the Sinhalese politician Robert Gunawardena (1916, p. 112) who founded Ceylon’s first political party, the Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party, wrote in the Maha Bodhi journal, arguing: “It has been shown that China and Japan received the light from India and now it affords an opportunity for the Chinese and the Japanese to pay off their indebtedness by reviving Buddhism in the land of its birth and ameliorating it in the land of its adoption.” Later that year, Dharmapala (1916, p. 261) concluded an essay he wrote by saying, “may we not hope that scholars from Burma,

⁷The temple at Bodh Gaya had come into Saivite custody by the nineteenth century. See Trevithick, 2006.

China, Siam, Tibet, Ceylon, and Japan will come over to India and work hard to give the people of India their lost inheritance.”

One important consequence of the focus on India as Buddhism’s birthplace was that it created an implicit distinction between India and the rest of the world and foregrounded India’s moral and material decline from its former glory as the locus of a vibrant Buddhist civilisation. This was also the central plot of Sakya Buddhism’s historical imaginaire and allowed Thass to contextualise caste oppression through explicit global comparisons. Consider, for instance, this essay published in *Tamilan* on 3 January 1912 in which Thass attributes the decline of Indian agriculture to the debasement of labour produced by Brahmanism and contrasts this with the agrarian prosperity of the modern Buddhist world:

Countries like Burma (*parma*), China (*caina*), Japan (*jappan*), and America (*amerikka*) have achieved agrarian prosperity with the help of their people and their cultivators, who have tilled the land and grown grain with their diligence, and thereby not only provided for their own people but also transported food to other countries and provided for people in those places, besides ushering in economic prosperity...[whereas in India] those Buddhist tillers (*pautta kutta velalatolilalar*) who resolutely resisted and refused to believe fabricated ideas about caste alone looked after the land and cultivated crops...while those who believed the Manudharma shastras, which established lower and upper castes, to be true were led to believe that the tiller’s labour is debased and so left cultivation behind, to their own ruin. (Thass, 1999, p. 389)

This description is notable for two reasons: first, needless to say, it relies on the political value of a comparison between India, Asia, and America more than it does on a positivist reading of these economies and second, it mentions America alongside Asian countries with seemingly no distinction between both. This is because a wide variety of western actors were implicated in the emergence of modern Buddhism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as David McMahan and others have suggested. These included Orientalists like Max Weber and the Rhys Davidses, archaeologists like James Burgess and Alexander Cunningham, and Buddhist sympathisers like Olcott and Lord Curzon, both of whom supported Dharmapala’s Bodh Gaya initiative in significant ways (Singh, 2004, Chapters 7, 8). Other figures like the British poet Edwin Arnold (whose book, “The Light of Asia,” was the single most influential popular work on Buddhism) and the American writer Dwight Goddard also played an important role in the emergence of modern Buddhism (McMahan, 2009, p. 83; D. Ober, 2021, p. 3).⁸ Entire intellectual movements like Romanticism and Transcendentalism were also influenced by Buddhism and became important purveyors of the religion in the west (McMahan, 2009, Chapter 3). While much of the west’s interface with Buddhism was through Asian interlocutors like Dharmapala and their role in the emergence of

⁸ Ober notes that Edwin Arnold’s book, by some accounts, outsold Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn and influenced everyone from Dharmapala and Gandhi to T. S. Eliot, Leo Tolstoy, and Herman Melville.

modern Buddhism was indelibly significant (D. F. Ober, 2016, pp. 11–14), the west nonetheless had an important presence in the Asian Buddhist world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. So much so, that Thass turned to Asia and the west not just as examples of prosperous modern countries but as examples of modern Buddhist countries that exemplified the ideal social and political order inspired by Buddhism:

The eminence and distinction of the Europeans (*airoppiyar*), Americans (*amerikkar*), Chinese (*cinar*), and Japanese (*jappaniyar*) that is visible in their plentiful wealth and disease-free life, and in the happy and joyful lives they lead with one another is well-known in the world...their accomplishments exemplify the Buddhist teaching: “love wisdom” (“*vittaiyai virumpu*” *enum pauttarkal potanaiyin pati*). There is no doubt that their leadership and administration, their vision and principles, their advancements in education and cultivation are because of this. (Thass, 1999, p. 709)

The turn towards a broader world beyond the subcontinent, even with the rhetorical flourishes and embellishments that we see here, had important implications given that the Sakya Buddhist movement grew in influence and established its presence in many parts of India and the British empire through networks of labour migration in which Dalits were implicated. Within three decades of its establishment, for instance, the Society had branches near military bases in Nagpur, Secunderabad, and Bangalore, railway workshops in Hubli, mining camps in the Kolar Gold Fields, and labour camps in Ceylon, Burma, and South Africa. Further, Buddhist monks from Ceylon, Burma, and elsewhere in Asia and the west were a routine presence in the Sakya Buddhist Society’s network of branches, offering religious instruction and presiding over ritual functions on important occasions (Aloysius, 1998, p. 69). For instance, in one of the most prominent branches of the Society at the Kolar Gold Fields, the Irish monk U Visuddha officiated the conversion of nearly “a thousand workers and their families” in 1907 (Cox, 2013, pp. 255–256). At the nearby Champion Reefs branch, the Burmese monk U Kantha established a “Young Men’s Buddhist Association Library” in 1916, no doubt modelled on Young Men’s Christian Associations, so that members would develop “the habit of reading Buddhist works and journals.” To that end, the Society’s headquarters in Madras served as a nodal point of transit to other places in Asia and this played a crucial role in connecting the Sakya Buddhist Society to Siamese, Burmese, Arakanese, and Sinhalese Buddhists (D. F. Ober, 2016, pp. 184–185). In effect, by turning to the Buddhist world of Asia and beyond, Sakya Buddhism not only created an emancipatory genealogy for Tamil Dalits but also reoriented them towards a global community of faith within which they could locate themselves.

Between the Global and Regional

To return to a theoretical concern with which we began in the introduction: how can we make sense of seemingly uneven or unidirectional interactions between global and regional sociocultural spheres? That Sakya Buddhism was part of a global network of Buddhist actors, ideas, and practices is evident but it is also clear that it never

acquired a global or translocal presence itself. As we have seen, this was because the movement's intellectual and social character remained resolutely Tamil in nature even as its network of contacts and influences as well as its geographical spread extended far beyond the Tamil south. Insofar as the trajectory of people, institutions, ideas, and practices across time and space remains a key line of enquiry within the subfields we know as intellectual and global history, intellectual itineraries that traverse varied spatial scales like the regional, national, and global present persistent problems for historians. As we know all too well, the historical experience of European imperialism and the epistemic influence of Enlightenment categories complicate any attempts to study the movement of people, institutions, ideas, and practices without replicating Eurocentric ideas of diffusion (i.e. the idea that foundational features of the modern world were birthed in Europe and then spread to other places) or Eurocentric assumptions about whether non-western historical phenomena can be favourably compared to their western counterparts and thereby considered authentically global in their significance (Chakrabarty, 2009; Chatterjee, 2004; Guha, 2003; Rao et al., 2001).

In the context of this article, constraints of space disallow an elaborate consideration of questions like how we may study global historical phenomena on terms other than those set by the west. In any case, these questions are somewhat extraneous here since we are not concerned with colonial encounters per se but with interactions across different parts of a non-western zone. To that end, we may benefit from Sanjay Subrahmanyam's (2015, pp. 131–132) suggestion that any historical study of the 'global' is "largely constructed around a reflection on space and geography" that requires us to "recognize that significant differences exist in geographically dispersed human societies, and to articulate those differences in some form of systematic understanding." In the historiography of modern Indian Buddhism, Douglas Ober's conception of "Banyan Tree Buddhism" is the only attempt to systematically understand the relationship between various strands of modern Indian Buddhism and the global Buddhist world. Ober (2016, p. 157) argues that much like the banyan tree "whose various branches have the appearance of being separate organisms yet stem from an often unknown single trunk," India's relationship with the broader Buddhist world took the form of a complex, interconnected web of branches with shifting centres and regional nodes. He also notes that "throughout the period that these societies were working to revive Buddhism among their respective locales, there was a current of communication, sharing and borrowing across cultural and geographical boundaries" (ibid., p. 192). This is qualitatively similar, if not identical, to other analytical formulations that propose to systematically understand the global landscape of Buddhism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as we saw in the introduction.⁹ Nor does this formulation explain the nature or extent of "sharing and borrowing" that modern Indian Buddhist movements engaged in, as welcome as the emphasis on multidirectional circulation is. More importantly, the point that "international Buddhists may not have exercised much authority in the shaping of local traditions" even as they played an important role in creating the impression "imagined or real...of a larger, unseen Buddhist community worldwide" is well-taken (ibid.). Yet, it still does not tell us how and why movements like Sakya Buddhism chose to turn outward and look to Asia or the west in some instances while remaining firmly embedded in their regional sociocultural milieux in other instances. We therefore need

⁹ See footnote 3.

an analytic category to make sense of the balance between global orientations and regional embeddedness that we see in movements like Sakya Buddhism.

To that end, we may use the category of 'pararegional' in the sense of something that is more-than-regional to describe figures, institutions, ideas, or practices that are aware of, engage with, and participate in transregional or global developments while remaining regional in their intellectual and sociocultural character. The defining feature of this Janus-faced engagement is intended audience rather than influence so that pararegional formations like Sakya Buddhism are not failed attempts to acquire global influence but rather, historical formations oriented towards a transregional network of influences without aspiring to insert themselves into that network as global players since their intended audience is a regional one. In moving away from the presumption of global aspiration that often underpins our view of interactions between the 'global' and 'regional,' we may be able to better appreciate that many historical formations engaged with transregional or global developments even as they remained regional in character because regionally-grounded intellectual and sociocultural traditions proved more relevant, useful, and important for their political project. In this formulation, the 'region' that pararegional historical formations are embedded in may be defined on the basis of geography or as with Sakya Buddhism, language. Consequently, their intellectual and sociocultural character is regional by virtue of its appeal to people within a historically-cohesive geographical expanse (say, the region of south India as defined by a shared language family and common geographical features like coastlines) or people within a particular linguistic sphere (say, the Tamil or Malayalam sociocultural sphere).

More importantly, pararegional historical formations are not simply engaged in the derivative task of transmitting global developments originating in the west or elsewhere to regional spheres. As we have seen with Sakya Buddhism, pararegional formations engaged with regional intellectual and sociocultural traditions in exceptionally nuanced ways and synthesised their reading of these regional traditions with knowledge derived from their engagement with transregional or global networks. This is precisely why anticaste thinkers like Thass and Ambedkar chose to establish their own Buddhist traditions based on their reading of history (Thass relied on classical Tamil texts, as we have seen, while Ambedkar relied on Pali and Sanskrit texts) rather than simply joining established Buddhist schools like Mahayana, Theravada, or Vajrayana Buddhism that they were certainly aware of and in contact with. The deliberate way in which pararegional historical formations chose to define their regional sphere of operation is evident in the fact that while Sakya Buddhism was wholly Tamil in character, Ambedkar wrote his foundational text, "The Buddha and His Dhamma," in English and based his reading of history on Pali and Sanskrit rather than Marathi sources. This was clearly meant to create a Buddhist tradition for an Indian Dalit public outside the Marathi sphere and across linguistic boundaries. Further, consider the way in which Ambedkar describes the impulse behind the writing of "The Buddha and His Dhamma" in an unpublished preface to the text:

I turned to the Buddha, with the help of the book given to me by Dada Keluskar. It was not with an empty mind that I went to the Buddha at that early age. I had a background, and in reading the Buddhist Lore I could always compare and contrast. This is the origin of my interest in the Buddha and His Dhamma. The urge to write this book has a different origin. In 1951, the Editor of the

Mahabodhi Society's Journal of Calcutta asked me to write an article for the Vaishak Number. In that article I argued that the Buddha's Religion was the only religion which a society awakened by science could accept... I also pointed out that Buddhism makes slow advance is due to the fact that its literature is so vast that no one can read the whole of it. That it has no such thing as a bible, as the Christians have, is its greatest handicap. On the publication of this article, I received many calls, written and oral, to write such a book. It is in response to these calls that I have undertaken the task. (Ambedkar, 1957, reproduced in Zelliott et. al., n. d.)

I quote this passage in extenso because it shows the self-conscious way in which Ambedkar makes a distinction between the source of his interest in Buddhism and the immediate pretext for the writing of "The Buddha and His Dhamma." He first refers to Dada Keluskar, a well-known Marathi writer and social reformer who presided over a public event held in honour of Ambedkar's achievement in passing the high school certificate exam. Keluskar gifted him a biography of the Buddha that he had written for the Baroda Sayajirao Oriental Series, an imprint patronised by the Gaekwad of Baroda who later offered Ambedkar funding to pursue graduate study abroad (*ibid.*). He then refers to an essay he wrote in the Maha Bodhi journal published from the Society's Calcutta branch as providing the immediate reason for his interest in writing the text itself, thereby exemplifying the ways in which pararegional movements such as Navayana Buddhism engaged with global networks while also clearly delineating the regional nature of their audience and their political project. In effect, the category of 'pararegional' allows us to simultaneously consider the regional salience and global engagements of historical formations without viewing them as parochial and marginal actors within a global landscape.

Conclusion

The Sakya Buddhist movement was profoundly shaped by the broader context of Asian Buddhist revival in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which involved a remarkable degree of intellectual exchanges, political convergences, and travel between East Asia, South Asia, and the west. As we have seen, Iyothee Thass's early encounter with figures like Olcott and Dharmapala oriented the movement towards a broader Buddhist world even as the intellectual and social character of Sakya Buddhism remained resolutely Tamil in nature. In other words, we have seen that Thass's intellectual project of constructing a Buddhist tradition for Dalits was firmly embedded in the Tamil print and public sphere even as it revealed an expansive conception of Buddhism as a world-historical phenomenon in its own right. Through an intertextual reading of historical imaginaires produced by Sakya Buddhism and its Asian Buddhist interlocutors, we saw that the expansively global conception of Buddhism was common to both traditions and this allowed Thass to contextualise caste in a global frame and thereby position caste as something more than a question of parochial salience within India. In effect, this historical imaginaire produced not just an emancipatory genealogy for Tamil Dalits but also a global community of faith within which they could locate themselves. We then dealt with the category of 'pararegional' as a way of describing interactions between global and regional sociocultural spheres that seriously considers the regional embeddedness of historical formations without

the assumption that these formations are merely smaller and localised iterations of the global developments that they engage with. In privileging the intended audience rather than the influence of (para)regional figures, institutions, ideas, and practices, we are better able to see their recourse to regional intellectual and sociocultural genealogies and their simultaneous engagement with global networks as a strategic choice rather than an inability to translate parochial political projects into global ones.

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