

Preface to the Indian Edition

I would like to thank S. Anand and Navayana Publishing for bringing out an Indian edition of my 2001 Oxford University Press publication, *Imagining a Place for Buddhism: Literary Culture and Religious Community in Tamil-Speaking South India*. Since both the original dissertation work (completed at Harvard University in 1997) and the appearance of the volume in the United States, scholarly work on the subject of Buddhist texts, authors, institutions, and artifacts in the pre-colonial Tamil-speaking region has continued, and I welcome this opportunity to note and acknowledge such contributions.

The extant record of a Buddhist presence in the Tamil-speaking areas of southern India is sparse, indeed, and various efforts have continued to catalogue the archaeological remnants of Buddhist activity in the region. Most exhaustive to date are the efforts of K. Sivaramalingam,¹ whose survey begins with a list of 105 important Buddhist sites in the contemporary state of Tamilnadu² and discusses at some length the relevant artifacts from each site.

The work of Peter Schalk at Uppsala University continues to provoke new and fascinating questions about the interpretation of this paltry Buddhist record, not only in the Tamil-speaking region of southernmost India, but in northern and eastern Sri Lanka as well. In a variety of recent publications,³ including the two-volume *Buddhism Among Tamils in Pre-Colonial Tamilakam and Īlam* co-authored with several Indian and Sri Lankan scholars,⁴ Schalk seeks to counter often grandiose claims about the age and persistence of a “Tamil Buddhism” based on, in his eyes, over-interpretation or mis-reading of the evidence. *Buddhism Among Tamils*, for example, begins with an abstract that characterizes the work to come as examining a “the rather pathetic history of a religion that failed to be recognized in Tamil society in the pre-colonial period in Tamilakam.”⁵ Tacking back and forth between evidence of Tamil-speaking Buddhists and institutions in South India and Sri Lanka, Schalk and his collaborators argue: (1) that no clear evidence exists for Buddhist institutions among Tamil speakers in southern India before the fourth century CE; (2) that the Pallavas in their capital city of Kāñcīpuram never promoted Buddhism in any way (rather, the Buddhist centers at Kāverippūmpaṭṭiṇam and Nākaṭṭiṇam flourished in the Cōḷa region); (3) that a particular brand of Buddhist thought and practice incorporating Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava elements (called by Schalk *cōḷappautam*) was eventually developed and exported, via Cōḷa conquest, to Sri Lanka (*īlaccōḷappautam*); (4) that Buddhists fared worse than Jains in pre-colonial Tamil South India because of the “national threat”⁶ posed

by Buddhist Lanka; and (5) that any royal patronage of Buddhists by non-Buddhist kings was due to a deep sense of royal pragmatism rather than any notion of religious tolerance.

Schalk's work upends many common assumptions found throughout the scholarship on Buddhism in the Tamil-speaking region, and any worthwhile response to the claims above would demand rigorous attention to the details of the texts, inscriptions, and artifacts that Schalk and his South Asian collaborators painstakingly present.

Given the historical/textual focus of *Imagining a Place for Buddhism*, the reader might well ask whether this volume bears any relevance to Navayana's mission as "India's only publishing house that focuses on caste from an anticaste perspective."⁷ Alongside the more well-known neo-Buddhist movements led by Anagārika Dharmapāla and B.R. Ambedkar, Paṇṭitar Ka. Ayōttitācar (often transliterated into English as Pandit Iyothē Thass), a scholar of Tamil language and literature introduced to Buddhist thought by the American theologian, Colonel H. S. Olcott, in Sri Lanka, founded the South India Sakya Buddha Association (later simply the South India Buddhist Association) in 1898. Established on the belief that the *paraiyar* of South India had been Buddhist since the time of Aśoka, Thass promoted Buddhism as a means of emancipating those at the very bottom of India's caste hierarchy from poverty and discrimination.⁸ Yet this Buddhism of social and political activism has not continued to grow and flourish; furthermore, as Schalk notes, this modern Buddhism bears little resemblance to its historical antecedents, beyond adding a new chapter to the history of a tradition and community "that has always struggled for survival in the history of Tamiḷakam."⁹ Do careful readings of the *Maṇimēkalai* and the *Viracōliyam*—both clearly the products of pre-modern courtly literary cultures aimed at elite and highly literate audiences—bear any relevance to contemporary life? Perhaps, if one concedes the value of narrative art, of poetic language, of disciplined and attentive use of language to any human community.

Notes

¹ K. Sivaramalingam, *Archaeological Atlas of the Antique Remains of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu*, ed. G. John Samuel (Chennai: Institute of Asian Studies, 1997).

² *Ibid.*, xii–xiii.

³ Including Peter Schalk, "Referents and Meanings of *siṃhala/sīhaḷa/cinkaḷam*," in *Kontinuität und Brüche in der Religionsgeschichte: Festschrift für Anders Hultgard zu seinem 65* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 549–561; "Ilavar and Lankans, Emerging Identities in a Fragmented Island," *Asian Ethnicity* 3/1 (2002): 47–62; and *īlam < sīhala? An Assessment of an Argument*, with Astrid van Nahl (Uppsala: Universitet, 2004).

⁴ Irāmaccantiraṅ Nākacāmi, Civacuppiramaniyam Patmanātaṅ, Peter Schalk, Turaicāmi Tayāḷaṅ, Āḷvāppiḷḷai Vēluppiḷḷai, *Buddhism Among Tamils in Pre-Colonial Tamiḷakam and Īlam*, eds. Peter Schalk and Āḷvāppiḷḷai Vēluppiḷḷai, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis: Historia Religionum, 19-20 (Uppsala: Universitet, 2002).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 840.

⁷ <http://navayana.org/>

⁸ See G. Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity: A Buddhist Movement Among the Tamils Under Colonialism* (Chennai: New Age International, 1998); and S. Perumal, *Revival of Modern Buddhism: A Historical Survey* (Vellore: Forum for New Society, 1992).

⁹ *Buddhism Among Tamils*, 24.