



## **Advocacy Journalism and the Self-Respect Movement in Late Colonial South India**

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KEYWORDS: CASTE, GENDER, SOCIAL REFORM, NATIONALISM, COLONIALISM, PRINT MEDIA, SELF-RESPECT MOVEMENT, SOUTH INDIA

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This essay analyses the Dravidian Self-Respect movement's use of print journalism to articulate a radical program of social reform in late colonial South India. To highlight the Movement's engagement with print media to further a social reform agenda, this essay analyses a particular case that is illustrative both in its representativeness and deviance. The Movement's response to the controversy and debate generated by the publication of Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* in 1927, as articulated in its flagship periodical *Kudi Arasu*, exemplifies its foundational critique of the institutions of Hindu caste patriarchy and as a result deviates substantially from the mainstream, nationalist response to the same.

As the most radical strand of the Dravidian movement, the Self-Respect movement articulated a radical politics of caste and gender and embarked on a far-reaching reform of Hindu society. The Movement intervened in the crowded journalistic space of early twentieth century South India that was dominated by Brahmins and other upper-caste elites to create an alternative space for articulating its goals and mobilising support for its program of social reform. The Self-Respect journals such as *Kudi Arasu* that emerged in this milieu provided an effective public platform for articulating the ideological differences between the nationalist movement and the Dravidian movement, and between Brahmins and non-Brahmins. With a



circulation of 10,000 by 1930 (a figure surpassed only by the nationalist Tamil newspaper *Swadesamitran* which had a circulation of 13,000), *Kudi Arasu* attracted a number of politically active non-Brahmins to its cause of social reform, especially as it pertained to its support of the Justice Party as an alternative to the Congress in the Madras Presidency (Mohan Ram 2003: Ch. 6). Through a particularly illustrative case study, this essay analyses the ways in which the Movement used the journalistic space to give voice to issues and concerns that lacked spokespersons in the mainstream print media.

As a variant of the Dravidian movement, albeit its most radical one, the Self-Respect movement shared the larger Dravidian narrative about the distinct non-Aryan culture of the Dravidians. As articulated by W. P. A. Soundarapandiya Nadar in his presidential address at the first Self-Respect conference convened in Chingleput in the Madras Presidency in February 1929, the narrative contained all the familiar elements: reference to an egalitarian pre-Aryan Dravidian society, construction of the North-South divide, the equation of Aryans with Brahmins, the conflation of Tamil and Dravidian, and most importantly, the appellation 'non-Brahmin' to all Hindus who were not Brahmins in the Presidency. Nadar called upon his audience:

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to contemplate [...] the conditions of the ancient Tamilian Society [...] Untouchability [...] and other monstrous customs were unknown to our ancients. [...] Ever since the days when the Aryans penetrated the South and attempted to strengthen and consolidate their position a great calamity overtook the country. The structure of our society was broken up by the adoption of the barbarous customs of the Northerners. Distinctions of caste and creed were superimposed upon a society based on equality and liberty [...] The pernicious doctrine of Varnasharama soon made its inroads into our community which was hitherto marked by its homogeneity and harmony [...] A community once marked by its solidarity and the feeling of brotherliness pervading it, is today owing to the influence of the Aryans broken up into innumerable divisions each fighting the other [...] But I would remind all those who take pride in their own exclusive superiority over certain sections of their brothers of the glaring fact that we are all of us treated alike by the Brahmins. We are all Sudras, Slaves and Bastards ("The Presidential Address" 1929).

This discourse had been in circulation in the Madras Presidency since at least the late nineteenth century and provided the broad framework for the various manifestations of the Dravidian movement—the Justice Party as its



political version, the Pure Tamil Movement as its cultural version, and the Self-Respect Movement as its social version.

The Justice Party, founded in 1916, sought to protect the political interests of the non-Brahmin castes and called upon them to unite and assert their rights to education and jobs as well as to combat the agitation for Home Rule since Home Rule would mean Brahmin rule, implying that the continued British presence in India was necessary to maintain the balance among communities and creeds (Irschick 1969: 358-67). The Pure Tamil Movement, started in 1915, sought to claim Shaivism as the true and original religion of the Tamil non-Brahmins and to purify Tamil of foreign words, particularly Sanskrit words (Kailasapathy 1979: 23-51; Ramaswamy 1998: 61-83; Bergunder 2002: 212-31). The Self-Respect Movement, started in 1925-26 following E. V. Ramasami's exit from the Congress over the issue of communal representation for non-Brahmins, sought to eschew politics in favour of social reform as the most effective way to combat the endemic inequalities of Hindu society.

All these versions of the Dravidian movement thus shared, to a greater or lesser extent, the larger Dravidian discourse about the distinct non-Aryan culture of the Dravidians. This construction itself was a contribution of British orientalist inquiry into languages as a means to uncover the genealogy of nations (Trautmann 2006: 12-21; Srinivasan 2006: 228-44). *A comparative grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian family of languages* published in 1856, Robert Caldwell, an evangelist Christian missionary who served as Bishop in Thirunelveli district in the Madras Presidency, did not restrict himself to making philological claims about the distinctness of what he called the 'Dravidian' family of languages. He also expounded on the history, society, and civilisation of the Dravidians as being non-Aryan with its corollaries of non-Brahmin and non-Sanskritic (Ravindiran 2000: 51-82). The implications of this construction were reflected in the various strands of the Dravidian Movement which, amid the heightened nationalistic rhetoric of the early twentieth century, manifested as a critique of the Indian National Congress.

The Self-Respect Movement, in particular, posed a radical challenge to Gandhi-led Congress nationalism by identifying the Congress as a bastion of Hinduism and its caste system. Since the Hindu religion and its caste system were held to be the primary obstacles to the 'attainment of true progress and freedom for the nation', the upper-caste composition of the Congress and Gandhi's religion-tinted nationalism were seen as especially problematic. Arguing that the demand for political independence or self-



rule—of the Congress variety—was incompatible with fundamental social reform since the former was helmed by upper-caste Hindus who had little, if any, interest in reform that will challenge the social status quo, the Movement declared its intention to shift its primary focus of attention from politics to social issues. It therefore abandoned its earlier intensive efforts to turn the Justice Party, the political arm of the Dravidian Movement, into an effective alternative to the Congress in Madras while continuing to support it more broadly. Implicit in this was also a critique of the Justice Party which was dominated by elite non-Brahmins who did not challenge the caste system as much as they resented Brahmin status within it.

Because of the hierarchy that obtained among the non-Brahmin caste groups, the Justice Party's ability to appeal to a constituency broader than that comprising the elite caste groups that its leaders represented was suspect right from its inception. Moreover, the use of the term 'non-Brahmin' to refer to all Hindus who were not Brahmins in the Madras Presidency silenced the diversity and differences among them. More broadly, the Self-Respect Movement challenged the belief that the realm of politics was the legitimate and most effective avenue for uplifting the non-Brahmins or more broadly for affecting social change. It is in this context that print journalism assumes a crucial role in articulating social agendas that challenged the liberal reformism of upper-caste elites. As Ranjith Thankappan argues in his essay in this issue on the slave castes of Travancore in colonial Kerala, an analysis of print journalism beyond its avowed role in the anti-colonial struggle throws fresh light on the history of anti-caste social movements.

In the mid-1920s, the Self-Respect Movement's commitment to radical social reform as a prerequisite for political independence was most forcefully reflected in its response to two key events: the publication of Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* in mid-1927 and Gandhi's endorsement of *varnashrama dharma* and Brahminic Hinduism and his use of stories from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* in his speeches during his tour of the Madras Presidency between June and October of 1927.<sup>1</sup>

Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*, published in 1927, faced a storm of indignant and horrified protest in India for its provocative contention that the Hindu religion sanctioned women's lowly status and for its graphic description of the alleged sexual habits of Hindus. In their urgency to blunt the edge of Mayo's criticisms and prove that Indians were indeed worthy and ready for self-rule—a claim that the British colonial government had little sympathy for and which Mayo's book intended to destroy—nationalists



and leaders in the nascent Indian women's movement rallied around the Sarda Bill that proposed raising the age of marriage for girls to 14. Eventually passed as the *Child Marriage Restraint Act* of 1929 that penalised the marriages of girls under the age of 14, it came to be seen as a fitting reply to at least some of Mayo's central criticisms of Hindu society and as marking the emerging Indian nation's arrival on the stage of modernity and progress. This aspiration to liberal modernity foreclosed more radical possibilities suggested by Mayo's contentions (Sinha 1999: 217f.). In contrast to this minimalistic response, the Self-Respect Movement published a daring defense of Mayo's book in the columns of its flagship periodical *Kudi Arasu*.

Kovai A. Ayyamuthu wrote a series of articles between October 1928 and March 1929 that were later compiled into a book titled *Mayo Kuttru Meyya Poyya* (*Mayo's charges: true or false*, Ayyamuthu 1929). In their forewords to the book, Periyar and J. S. Kannappar, editor of *Dravidan*<sup>2</sup>, the Tamil language periodical of the Justice Party, wholeheartedly endorsed Ayyamuthu's views on Mayo's book. They extolled the importance of the book for educating the masses on roadblocks to self-respect and ultimately to the nation's freedom itself. Ayyamuthu's defense of Mayo thus represented both the Self-Respect Movement's views on religion, caste, and gender as well as its sharp departure from mainstream narratives of the same.

### **Mother India and its claims**

Mayo's central argument in her book repeated the imperialist narrative of the timeless, unchanging nature of Indian society, and held Indians' slavish adherence to customs and traditions responsible for this state of affairs. Therefore, she argued, Indians were themselves responsible for changing this condition (Mayo 1927: 16). Although she held the British administration in India responsible for not forcing more rapid changes, she nevertheless considered it to be the only agent of change and progress in India. Unfortunately, the pace of change was not proportionate to the enormity of the situation. In her view, the British government, however imperfect, was the only hope for the masses until Indians became internally motivated to improve their situation. Mayo attributed Indians' sorry plight first and foremost to their sexual habits (ibid.: 22).

Mayo laid the ills of Indian society at the altar of the practice of child marriage that perpetuated the ignorance and oppression of girls and



women. With no education, taught only to worship and serve their husbands as gods and trained only in the rituals of worshipping household gods, and with motherhood thrust upon them at an early age, girl-mothers raised their children in ignorance. In the most graphic terms, she described the connection between child marriage and masculinity:

Take a girl child twelve years old, a pitiful physical specimen in bone and blood, illiterate, ignorant, without any sort of training in habits of health. Force motherhood upon her at the earliest possible moment. Rear her weakling son in intensive vicious practices that drain his small vitality day by day. Give him no outlet in sports. Give him habits that make him, by the time he is thirty years of age, a decrepit and querulous old wreck—and will you ask what has sapped the energy of his manhood? (ibid.: 16)

Mayo went on to make even more scandalous assertions about the evils resulting from this preoccupation with producing children and from the ignorance of women. She alleged that high-caste wives with impotent husbands were sent to temples to be impregnated by priests (ibid.: 30). Similarly, Mayo described in stark terms another situation that in her view was typical across regions, both urban and rural, in India that characterised the pitiable plight of innumerable girl-wives:

Married as a baby, sent to her husband at ten, the shock of incessant use was too much for her brain. It went. After that, beat her as he would, all that she could do was to crouch in the corner, a little twisted heap, panting. Not worth the keep. And so at last, in despair and rage over his bad bargain, he slung her small body over his shoulder, carried her out to the edge of the jungle, cast her in among the scrub thicket, and left her there to die. (ibid.: 55)

Here, Mayo highlighted the not un-heard of instances of marital rape of sexually immature wives by much older husbands. The most sensational such case was the death of eleven-year-old Phulmonee Devi in Bengal that provided the much-needed impetus to pass the bill seeking to raise the age of consent to sexual relations within marriage from ten to twelve in 1891.<sup>3</sup>

Mayo alluded to the illegal and immoral consequences of enforced Hindu widowhood wherein some Hindu widows committed sati, outlawed by the British Government in 1829, to escape the terrible plight of widowhood while others took to prostitution unable to adhere to the constraints of chaste Hindu widowhood.<sup>4</sup> However, in the latter case, Mayo again blamed the girl's exposure from infancy to 'the same atmosphere of sexual stimulus that surrounded the boy child, her brother' as the reason for her stronger



desire for sex over adherence to social law. Thus, for Mayo, the Hindu male's method of socialisation into sex/sexual habits was at the root of Indians' woes and their inability to govern themselves (Mayo 1927: 32). Mayo thus linked premature sexual activity to male impotence and widespread venereal disease, child marriage to high rates of infant mortality, and enforced widowhood to prostitution, all of which, in her view, made Indians unfit for self-rule.

While both the British and Indians had acknowledged many of the 'ills' plaguing Hindu society that Mayo described—the many reform efforts and legislative acts of the nineteenth century attesting to this<sup>5</sup>—what distinguished Mayo's work was its sensationalism backed by a pro-imperialist argument. Also informing the highly-charged reception of Mayo's book was the new context of 'nationalist modernity' that sought to separate itself from the 'colonialist modernity' of the nineteenth century—a context that mobilised leaders and activists of the nascent Indian women's movement to rally around the Sarda Bill, the eventual passage of which as the *Child Marriage Restraint Act* of 1929 heralded the 'important transitional moment' that marked Indian nationalism as the agent of modernity (Sinha 1999: 207).

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The sensational appeal of Mayo's book owed both to her contentions about the sexual habits of Hindus and to her graphic descriptions of them. She particularly targeted Brahmin/upper-caste Hindu men—the very demographic that dominated the nationalist movement—who she saw as the creators and perpetrators of conditions that enabled women's oppression. Not surprisingly, nationalists generally denounced her book as a slander on an entire people and culture. They vilified Mayo as a conscious agent of British imperial interests who during her stay in India focused on only those things that would support her pro-imperialist position that the civilising influence of British rule was necessary as Indians were as yet undeserving of political independence.

### **Nationalist response to Mother India**

A flurry of publishing activity marked the nationalist response to Mayo. Books such as *Father India* (Iyer 1928), *Unhappy India* (Lajpat Raj 1928), *A son of Mother India answers* (Mukherji 1928), *Miss Mayo's 'Mother India': a rejoinder* (Natarajan 1928), declared her account to be highly prejudicial and her motive questionable. M. K. Gandhi (1869-1948) called Mayo's book 'the drain inspector's report' and chastised her as an 'Indophobe and Anglophile refusing to see anything good about Indians and anything bad



about the British and their rule' (Khalsa Diwan Society 1928: 1). He questioned the veracity of many of her claims and purported facts, especially where she quoted him in support of her arguments. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), nationalist poet from Bengal and first Asian to win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913, accused her of 'the subtlest method of falsehood, this placing of exaggerated emphasis upon insignificant detail, giving to the exception the appearance of the rule' (ibid.: 5). For Lala Lajpat Rai (1865-1928), the prominent nationalist leader from Punjab who advocated a militant anti-British stance in the Indian National Congress, the book was a 'hodge-podge of truths, half-truths, partial truths and no truths (ibid.: 8).'

Prominent women social reformers and nationalists responded to Mayo as well. Aware of the popularity of Mayo's book in the United States and to counter its negative impact on American perception of the nationalist movement,<sup>6</sup> Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), poet, nationalist leader, women's rights activist, and the first Indian woman president of the Indian National Congress, toured the United States of America in 1928-29 where her lectures presented a more positive image of Indians and their aspirations for self-rule (Arora 2009: 87-105). She specifically sought to salvage the prestige of Hindu womanhood by complicating Mayo's simplistic and one-sided portrayal that saw Hindu women as universally and unequivocally oppressed by the Hindu religion. Muthulakshmi Reddi (1886-1968), first president of the Women's Indian Association (1917-18), first woman member (1926-27) and later first woman deputy-president (1928-29) of the Madras Legislative Council, found Mayo's wholesale condemnation of the Hindu religion unacceptable. She argued that the American author was motivated by the set purpose of bolstering British imperialism and showing Indians to be unfit for self-rule.<sup>7</sup> In her criticism of Mayo, Annie Besant (1847-1933), Anglo-Irish Theosophist, ardent supporter of Home Rule for Indians, and first woman president of the Indian National Congress, held the British government equally responsible for the prevailing social condition citing its poor record in social reform and attested to the resilience of Hindu civilisation as proof of its many redeeming characteristics:

The writer seems to have merely sought for filth. Does she imagine that if her presentation were an accurate picture of Hindu civilisation that Hinduism could have produced a civilisation in India dating from the sinking of the Island of Poseidonus some 9,000 years before the Christian era? It would have been smothered in its own putrefication. But India has a future even greater than her marvelous past. (Gandhi et al. 1928: 6)





An ardent believer in the greatness of Hinduism and its defining role in India's culture and heritage, Besant found Mayo's claims to be grossly exaggerated and misplaced.

Liberal Tamil Brahmin nationalists such as C. S. Ranga Iyer, a Tamil Brahmin Congress member of the Central Legislative Assembly, G. A. Natesan,<sup>8</sup> a Tamil Brahmin nationalist and a writer and journalist from the Madras presidency, and K. Natarajan, the Tamil Iyer Brahmin editor of the *Indian Social Reformer*, deftly negotiated the pull from opposite directions—one that required unravelling Mayo's imperialistic motives without being too defensive and the other that necessitated confronting the ills of Hindu society without providing more fodder for critics such as Mayo. They abrogated to themselves and other nationalists the right and duty to defend Indians against the malicious propaganda of imperial apologists such as Mayo while admitting the evils of Hindu society and working to reform them (Iyer 1930: 79f.). Much like the nineteenth-century reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), Keshub Chandra Sen (1838-84), and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-91), they saw no contradiction in maintaining and manifesting their caste status while also propagating reform in practices and customs pertaining to women.<sup>9</sup>

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Nineteenth-century reform efforts spearheaded by men such as Roy and Vidyasagar had, no doubt, resulted in the legal prohibition of customs such as *sati* and female infanticide and the legalisation of Hindu widow remarriage.<sup>10</sup> But the endemic and entrenched beliefs and attitudes that sanctioned practices such as child marriage and enforced chaste widowhood had resisted legal interventions and continued to perpetuate women's lowly status.<sup>11</sup> The Self-Respect Movement made a radical intervention in this reformist discourse and action by positing that a thorough examination of these beliefs and practices was a necessary prerequisite to eradicating the socio-religious constraints under which women lived and functioned. Positing the inextricable link between caste and patriarchy, it argued that maintenance of the caste system was antithetical to improvement in women's status.

### **Self-Respect Movement and Mother India**

The Self-Respect Movement's position in the Mayo controversy reflected its commitment to social reform as a prerequisite for political independence. Contrary to the dominant nationalist narrative that privileged political independence over social reform, it argued that political freedom before the attainment of social equality would only perpetuate Brahmin hegemony.



Through its flagship periodical *Kudi Arasu*, the Movement began to challenge Brahmin dominance in the social and religious life of the non-Brahmins in South India. Pointed criticisms of the social behaviour of Brahmins appeared frequently in *Kudi Arasu*. For example, it criticised the Brahmins' practice of wearing the sacred thread to distinguish their high-born status (*Kudi Arasu*, 27 Dec. 1925). It argued that self-respect was more important than self-rule. In order to achieve self-respect, non-Brahmins should first free themselves from the yoke of Brahminism (*ibid.*, 15 Aug. 1926).

In late 1926, the Movement declared its intention to shift its primary focus of attention from politics to social issues, abandoning its intensive efforts to turn the Justice Party into an effective alternative to the Congress in Tamil Nadu. In addition, Periyar toured the Tamil districts of the Presidency during November and December 1926 to popularise the Movement and recruit new members. To raise awareness among the non-Brahmins of the lowly status assigned to them by the Hindu caste system, Movement leaders began the propaganda for 'desanskritising' Tamil society. They condemned Brahmin priesthood as nothing but a means to maintain Brahmin hegemony and oppress the non-Brahmins, and the vedas, *shastras*,<sup>12</sup> and *puranas*<sup>13</sup> as tools of Brahmins to promote their self-interest at the cost of the self-respect of the non-Brahmins (*Kudi Arasu*, 3 Apr. 1927). When the Mayo controversy erupted in mid-1927, the Movement was well-placed, given its daring criticism of caste and Brahmins, to defend her claims about them.

A key incident that raised the stakes for the Movement and motivated Self-Respecters to launch a frontal attack on the caste system was Gandhi's public support for varnashrama dharma<sup>14</sup> during his tour of South India between June and October of 1927.<sup>15</sup> In July, Periyar and S. Ramanathan, Self-Respect activist and editor of the *Revolt*, the English-language newspaper of the Movement, met with Gandhi in response to his queries about the Cheranmadevi Gurukulam.<sup>16</sup> In that meeting, they had placed before him their proposals for the 'attainment of true progress and freedom for India' which included getting rid of the Congress, the Hindu religion and varnashrama, and Brahmin dominance (*Kudi Arasu*, 27 Aug. 1927).

Gandhi made a distinction between varnashrama's true nature which he valued and its current practice which he abhorred.<sup>17</sup> Periyar made no such distinction. Claiming that the concept of varnashrama, sanctified in Hinduism, formed the bedrock of caste inequalities, Periyar advocated its wholesale condemnation. In an editorial entitled 'The Mahatma and



Varnashrama', he accused Gandhi of a lack of commitment to the eradication of untouchability (*Kudi Arasu*, 7 Aug. 1927). Although Gandhi openly condemned the practice of untouchability, he did not challenge the principle of caste distinction by birth elaborated in the law of varnashrama as a way of organising society; he was opposed merely to the inequalities that were perpetrated and justified in its name. Periyar dismissed Gandhi's idealised version of varnashrama as irrelevant to the issue of eradication of untouchability, for its social effects that manifested as caste-based inequalities needed to be addressed. To achieve the goal of eradication of untouchability, no amount of pontification on the ideal of varnashrama would help. In fact, its justification, however well-intentioned, meant the perpetuation of the evil of untouchability. The only alternative was to condemn it unequivocally. Given Gandhi's popularity and his venerated status among the masses, his propagation of varnashrama, idealised as it may be, would prove a detriment to the eradication of untouchability. In fact, his stature made it imperative that Gandhi refrain from publicly endorsing varnashrama.<sup>18</sup>

To promote self-respect, Periyar condemned Gandhi and his stand on varnashrama. He also strongly objected to Gandhi's public endorsement of Brahminic Hinduism and his use of stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata in his speeches.<sup>19</sup> Periyar responded to readers' concerns about the wisdom of opposing the Mahatma by pointing out that neither profit nor popularity motivated his zeal for public service (*Kudi Arasu*, 28 Aug. 1927). By late 1927, Periyar's break with Gandhi was complete and final.<sup>20</sup> This was reflected in the *Kudi Arasu* as it dropped the slogan 'Long Live Mahatma' from its crest and did away with the saintly honorific 'Mahatma' when referring to Gandhi choosing instead to address him merely as 'M.K. Gandhi' or 'Shri Gandhi' (ibid., 6 and 20 Nov. 1927). It must be noted here that Gandhi was reading and composing his response to Mayo's Mother India during this period ("Interview to 'The Hindu'", pp. 68f.; "Drain inspector's report", *Young India*).

Periyar's firm belief in print journalism as an effective, even necessary, platform for social reform advocacy must be understood in the context of his pessimistic view of electoral politics to affect meaningful social change. In fact, he saw political power gained through the electorate and radical social reform as mutually exclusive. Given this disavowal of electoral politics at a time when it was fast emerging as the legitimate means for amassing political power and holding political office, Periyar turned to the print space as a key weapon in his arsenal of social reform advocacy. Here,



Periyar had more in common with Gandhi than not. In their use of print space, both men were motivated not so much by crass commercial interests or the need for self-aggrandisement but by the altruism of public service. Also, the goals for which they mobilised the print space so effectively were radical. However, Periyar's vision of a radically transformed society involved bringing down the entire edifice of Hindu society—free or at the least freer as he was from the clutches of the anti-colonial nationalist struggle to which Gandhi was firmly tied.

Continuing its attack on the caste system that accorded high ritual status to the Brahmins, the *Kudi Arasu* called for reforms of the social and religious customs of the non-Brahmins and suggested ways to purge the non-Brahmin community of Brahminic influences. One was to employ non-Brahmin priests instead of Brahmins for conducting worship and ceremonies in the home and the temples, and another was to chant Tamil mantras and sing Tamil devotional hymns like the Thevaram in place of Sanskrit on these occasions (*Kudi Arasu*, 17 Oct. 1927).<sup>21</sup> Social segregation and allocation of rooms exclusive to the Brahmins at public choultries<sup>22</sup> and railway stations should end. Untouchables were enjoined to challenge the Hindu caste system and establish their rights (*Kudi Arasu*, 17 Oct. 1927).

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By the time the Mayo controversy erupted, the Self-Respect Movement had articulated a well-grounded and lucid understanding of the negative discriminatory impact of the caste system for non-Brahmins and a firm commitment to build a new social order based on equality and social justice. Mayo's relentless focus on women's miserable plight in Mother India that replayed, in a new context, the early nineteenth-century imperialist narrative that linked civilisation status with the treatment of women<sup>23</sup> pushed the issue of women's status to the forefront of national and international attention. Just as the establishment of British rule in India found justification in the lowly status of women, the growing demand for self-rule necessitated a re-emphasis of British civilising credentials through a reiteration of women's continued lowly status. While the early nineteenth century colonial 'gaze' resulted in the legal prohibition of *sati* in 1829 (Mani 1989: 88-126), the early twentieth century imperial "gaze" which came in the sensational form of Mayo's Mother India provided the much-needed impetus for the passage of the *Child Marriage Restraint Act* exactly a century later (Sinha 2006). Consequently, responses to Mayo's book had to contend with the issue of women's status. Critics of Mayo did this by citing ongoing reform efforts to improve women's condition and/or by (claiming that her account grossly and disingenuously exaggerated the



actual condition of women. As defenders of Mayo's claims, the Self-Respect Movement seized the opportunity to foreground gender inequality as a defining aspect of the Hindu caste system. Mayo thus became an unintended ally of the Self-Respect Movement.

### **Ayyamuthu and Mother India**

In a series of articles published in the *Kudi Arasu* between October 1928 and March 1929, Kovai Ayyamuttu, a Self-Respecter, systematically defended Mayo and answered the specific criticisms of her book from nationalists and the Hindu orthodoxy. In their forewords to Ayyamuthu's collection of articles, Periyar and Kannappan considered it an important, relevant, and useful endeavor. They pointed to Ayyamuthu's credentials to write such a book citing his passion for social reform which he had demonstrated not merely through words but also through concrete action as exemplified by his participation in the Vaikom agitation.<sup>24</sup>

Although Ayyamuthu was quick to point out that Mayo's account was driven by imperialistic motives, he refused to dismiss it as one of pure exaggeration and imagination. Regardless of the motivation that propelled the book's contentions, he remained open to the possible unintended positive outcome of Mayo's book. He found this useful in and of itself as it balanced its imperialist and racist bias. Writing between 1928 and 1929, Ayyamuthu articulated a coherent understanding of the nexus among religion, caste, and gender. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai argue that the year 1928-29 'marked a new beginning' in the Movement's attention to gender concerns in terms of the frequency, urgency, and intensity with which it appealed to people to pay attention to them (Geetha & Rajadurai 1998: 380).

While Ayyamuthu's articles in the *Kudi Arasu* comprised 'one of the most elaborate and extended defenses of Mother India produced in India' (see Sinha 2006: 127), Kannappan's editorials in the *Dravidan* also unequivocally defended Mayo. Between October 1928 and April 1929, Ayyamuthu wrote thirty-three articles, of which nine were specifically on women, five on Brahmins, and four on 'untouchables'. These eighteen articles addressed issues that comprised the core of the Self-Respect critique of Hindu society with the remaining articles addressing Mayo's arguments and the nationalist response more generally. The following discussion addresses Ayyamuthu's general response as well as the *Dravidan* editorials.



Ayyamuthu's critique functions at three levels. At the broadest level, it is embedded in the larger Aryan-Dravidian discourse that posited an egalitarian society among Dravidians that was corrupted by the arrival of the Aryans and their caste system (see Rajah 1925). His discourse posited an originary, pure indigenous Dravidian culture based on region, language, race and ethnicity separate and distinct from Aryan culture. At the second level, Ayyamuthu's response is situated within the discourse on caste that fundamentally divided the people of South India into Brahmins and non-Brahmins wherein the former was equated with Aryans and the latter with Dravidians. At the third and most specific level, it uses gender as a category of analysis to posit women's lowly status as a defining feature of the caste system. In doing so, it departs from and deepens the Dravidian critique of Aryans, Brahmins, Sanskrit, and the North which was until then gender-blind. The Dravidian discourse about Aryan domination and oppression was inimical even to the possibility of the differences between Dravidian women and men in their experience of the caste system. Self-Respect critique of caste patriarchy—embodied here in Ayyamuthu's response to Mayo—was a radical intervention in this discourse.

As already discussed, nationalist reaction to Mayo dwelt on her imperialistic agenda that sought to portray India as unfit for self-rule. From this characterisation of Mayo, three discursive moves emerged. One, most famously and succinctly articulated by Gandhi, was to label her a 'garbage collector' meaning that Mayo deliberately looked only for the wrongs in Indian society and then gave undue weight to them. Two, in the glare of Mayo's blatant attack in which she minced no words, many nationalists took recourse in a defensive cultural nationalist argument. While admitting to the existence of ills within Indian society and the need to remedy them, they either reminded Mayo of the dictum that 'a pointing finger has three fingers pointing back' and listed the ills of American/Western society or accused her of a lack of knowledge and understanding of the practices she attacked in her book. Three, acutely aware of the possible negative impact of Mayo's account on American perceptions of and support for India's quest for self-rule, Sarojini Naidu, a pre-eminent woman nationalist leader, was sent to America to offer a more balanced perspective.

Challenging the first of these discursive moves, both Ayyamuthu and Kannappar found nationalist characterisation of Mayo as garbage collector to be the most suitable title for the service she had rendered. While nationalists meant it as a criticism of her one-sided account of Hindu religion and society, Ayyamuthu and Kannappar used it to praise her



efforts. In an editorial titled 'Mayo! What Can We Give You in Return' that endorsed Mayo's second book *Slaves of the Gods*<sup>25</sup> even before its Indian edition was published, Kannappar applauded her for once again seeking to render yeoman service to the cause of social reform in India—an act so valuable that it could scarcely be repaid (*Dravidan*, 9 Apr. 1929: 6). He subverted Gandhi's negative characterisation of Mayo as a garbage collector by turning it into a label of praise. For him, it was a label most befitting her for, he claimed, Mayo collected 'our garbage when we refused to or could not.' Regardless of her intentions, Indians must be grateful to her for exposing their garbage. He argued that for a society that branded anyone including Self-Respecters who exposed its ills as atheists and thereby dismissed them, a 'whiplash' such as Mayo's book was absolutely necessary to arouse people out of their stupor. Similarly, Ayyamuthu contended that Indians should be grateful that Mayo, like a dutiful garbage collector, had accumulated in one place all the negatives of India and Indians such as laziness, superstition, illiteracy, disease, and lack of hygiene. Ayyamuttu appealed to the 'heroes' who attacked Mayo for piling up India's problems to instead thank her for giving them the opportunity to understand the ills that plagued Indian society and work towards eliminating them, lest, Ayyamuttu warned, 'you and your nation will go the way of this garbage!' (ibid.: 9)

The Self-Respect emphasis on rationalism had little, if any, sympathy for cultural nationalist arguments. Consequently, Ayyamuthu and Kannappar attacked the nationalists for harping on the notion of a glorious past to camouflage societal ills. Kannappar maintained that this tendency among Indians to take refuge in their antiquity every time a fault was exposed blinded them to the truth. Attachment to tradition embedded in caste and puranas was not conducive to rational thinking which alone would allow a person to discover truths. Religion and its associated beliefs and practices were, for Kannapar, stumbling blocks to the development of the skills of reasoned judgment and analysis. Ayyamuthu found the constant reference to India's great cultural traditions, religious thought, and its art and architecture to be a mere ploy to deflect attention from what needed to be done to improve society. For him, reason demanded that Mayo's claims be examined carefully for their veracity or lack thereof and then acted upon rather than be categorically dismissed as the rants of a rabid imperialist. To validate more fully Mayo's critique, Ayyamuttu pointed to anecdotes about strange superstitious practices of those who wear the Hindu religion as a 'crown on their heads!'<sup>26</sup> For the people to be pure in their minds, '[s]houldn't these idols and temples be blown apart by German Cannons?'<sup>27</sup>



Religion and its concrete manifestations in the form of temples, idols and irrational practices had stalled the development of rational thinking. Consequently, for Ayyamuthu, nationalists' attempts to bury the possible truths contained in Mayo's claims under the blanket of an imperialist bias reeked of a denial syndrome.

Self-Respect critique of Hindu religion was embedded in the observable social and material effects resulting from religious injunctions and beliefs. Self-Respecters' iconoclastic interpretation of sacred Hindu literature, particularly the popular epic *Ramayana*, exposed it to be artifacts of Aryan, Brahmin, Sanskritic, North Indian hegemonic aspirations that contained the seeds of caste and gender inequalities.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, seeking recourse in textual sources to deny Mayo's claims was not a choice, for Self-Respecters found them to be originally culpable in the oppression of women and lower castes. Moreover, given their focus on the material effects of religious injunctions, as in their critique of varnashrama dharma, neither idealistic interpretations based on ancient texts nor their possibly original positive intentions mattered. The material basis of the Self-respect critique of religion thus had radically different implications for social reform and therefore manifested in a radically different response to Mayo.

Consequently, Ayyamuthu and Kannappar ridiculed nationalist efforts to counter the alleged misinformation in Mayo's book with positive images of India by deputing Sarojini Naidu on a tour of the United States. Deeming such propaganda to be worthless, Ayyamuthu appealed to the nationalist leaders to instead send their 'devis' to all corners of India to chase away the ghosts of superstition, caste, idolatry, and temples. The true and final test of religion was not what was written in journals and magazines extolling its virtues but everyday living. The voluminous debate surrounding the abolition of child marriage had not produced a single useful law; in the name of protecting religion, necessary reforms were stalled (Ayyamuthu, "Mayo's charges": 9). Ayyamuthu pointedly condemned the approach of the orthodox and the nationalists to social reform wherein instead of addressing material realities as they clearly existed, they resorted to analysis and interpretations of textual evidence of customs and traditions to obfuscate material reality and stall legislative action. Such an approach to reform was self-defeating as there could be as many versions and interpretations of what was right, wrong, sanctioned, and prohibited in the scriptures as there were people. Ayyamuthu's critique here intervenes in the dominant narrative of anti-colonial struggle as articulated through print that at best limited the scope of social reform and at worst in the guise





of social reform sought to obfuscate it by pontificating on merits of religion as contained in scripture as opposed to its ills as evident in practice. In doing so, Ayyamuthu attests to the importance of print journalism in articulating various social reform agendas during the colonial period.

Kannappar similarly criticised Sarojini Naidu whom he labeled 'Sarojini Devi' for wasting her time defending the indefensible in America when she could more usefully work for social reform in India. Her efforts to convince the ignorant American public that Mayo's book was a lie was bound to backfire since, he claimed, her efforts cannot salvage India's prestige when few, if any, of Mayo's claims could be challenged. Naidu would not be able to escape the brickbats of the crowds, he asserted, if she dared to do this in India. Kannappar addressed every custom Mayo catalogued in her book and asked: 'Can we deny this?' (*Dravidan*, 30 Oct. 1928: 4) In another editorial, Kannappar called it shameful that Sarojini Devi undertook propaganda against Mayo when 'orthodox waste' such as Mr. M. K. Acharya<sup>29</sup> and the Swaraj Party politicians stalled the Sarda Bill by claiming that religion would die if child marriage was abolished. The editorial queried, 'Shouldn't waste such as Mr. Acharya be got rid of before she goes to America?' He also held the Government of India responsible for such a state of affairs as it was supporting the claims of the orthodoxy and preventing social reform laws from coming into force. Given this situation, he asked, 'why won't a Mayo write a book such as "Mother India"?' Written during the height of the acrimonious debate pertaining to the Sarda Bill, Kannappar's critique underscored Self-Respecters' anger and frustration at government inaction and orthodox stonewalling as well as nationalist obfuscation of the fundamental issue of women's lowly status that Mayo underscored in her book.

What separates Ayyamuthu's and less so Kannappar's response from those of nationalists was their willingness to look beyond Mayo's motives and to assess the validity of her claims. The nationalists neither intended to—because they were furious over her ridicule of their aspirations for self-rule—nor were able to—because for them her imperialistic agenda nullified her credibility as a disinterested chronicler of India—separate her motive from her arguments. Even when they acknowledged some of Mayo's claims about the ills of Hindu society, as did Iyer and Natarajan, their responses were reluctant, superficial, and dismissive, emanating from the starkly defensive position into which Mayo had pushed them. Any more fundamental acknowledgement of Mayo's claims would mean endorsing a rabid imperialist, which to them was unthinkable given their aspirations for self-rule. For the Self-Respecters, self-rule was a distant goal as their



priority was to overthrow Hindu religion and its caste system. Since Mayo held these institutions culpable in the oppression of women, they could rationally examine her claims unhindered by her imperialistic agenda.

Thus, the Self-Respect response to Mayo's book, as articulated in the *Kudi Arasu*, provides a representative sample of the Movement's iconoclasm and its commitment to a radical social reform program that refused to kowtow to the demands of mainstream nationalism. In the crowded journalistic milieu of early twentieth-century South India dominated by nationalistic newspapers and periodicals in both English and the vernacular, Self-Respect periodicals like *Kudi Arasu* alongside its English-language publication *Revolt*, provided the much-needed alternative journalistic space for voicing opinions on the most urgent issues of the time. Since it was Indian self-rule that Mayo intended to oppose, her book had very different implications, insinuations, and meaning for the nationalists and the Self-Respecters. Ayyamuthu's articles in the *Kudi Arasu* transcends the extreme dichotomous positions that either viewed the defense of her book as an apology for imperialism or the criticism of it as nationalist pride manifesting a 'denial syndrome'. Self-Respecters were able to speak from this position because they acknowledged and recognised the greater obstacle to self-rule—caste-bound Hindu patriarchy that enslaved women, lower castes, and outcastes.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> "Speech at Pachaiyappa's College, Madras, September 7, 1927," p. 48; "Speech at public meeting, Cuddalore, September 10, 1927," pp. 75-7; "Speech at Tanjore, September 16, 1927," pp. 121f. In: *The collected works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG)*, 40, 2 September 1927 – 1 December 1927. [www.gandhiashramsevagram.org/gandhi-literature/collected-works-of-mahatma-gandhi-volume-1-to-98.php](http://www.gandhiashramsevagram.org/gandhi-literature/collected-works-of-mahatma-gandhi-volume-1-to-98.php) [retrieved 28.12.18].

<sup>2</sup> Started in 1917, *Dravidan* ceased publication in May 1931. Periyar managed the newspaper in the late 1920s.

<sup>3</sup> For a feminist analysis of the debate on the age of consent in late nineteenth century Bengal, see Tanika Sarkar. 1993. Rhetoric against the age of consent: resisting colonial reason and the death of a child-wife. *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 4, 1993, pp. 1869-78.

<sup>4</sup> Historians have documented how Indians and British before Mayo had recognised this connection and had made similar arguments. See Ratnabali Chatterjee. 1993. Prostitution in nineteenth century Bengal: construction of class and gender. *Social Scientist*, (21) 244-6, pp. 159-72; Sumanta Banerjee. 1998. *Dangerous outcast: the prostitute in nineteenth century Bengal*. Calcutta: Seagull Books; Madhu Kishwar. 2008. The daughters of Aryavarta. In: Sumit Sarkar & Tanika Sarkar, eds. *Women and social reform in colonial India*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 201-29.

<sup>5</sup> The colonial government criminalised *sati* and female infanticide in 1829 and 1870 respectively, and legalised widow marriages in 1856.



<sup>6</sup> See Manoranjan Jha. 1971. *Katherine Mayo and India*, Chap 1. New Delhi: People's Publishing House, for the argument that Mayo's book was consciously intended to quell American support for Indian self-rule. Also see, Paul Teed. 2003. Race against memory: Katherine Mayo, Jabez Sunderland, and Indian Independence. *American Studies*, 44 (1-2), pp. 35-57; Asha Nadkarni. 2008. "World-Menace": national reproduction and public health in Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*. *American Quarterly*, 60 (3), pp. 805-27.

<sup>7</sup> Nehru memorial museum and library (hereafter NMML), *Muthulakshmi Reddi Papers: speeches and writings*, (2) part 2.

<sup>8</sup> Natesan was the founder and proprietor of G. A. Natesan & Co. which published nationalist books and journals. The most prominent was *The Indian Review*, a monthly publication that focused mostly on nationalist themes.

<sup>9</sup> For an account of reform movements in colonial India, see David Kopf. 1969. *British orientalism and the Bengal renaissance: the dynamics of Indian modernization, 1773-1835*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Kenneth Jones. 1989. *Socio-religious reform movements in British India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Anshu Malhotra. 2002. *Gender, caste, and religious identities: restructuring class in colonial Punjab*. Delhi: Oxford University Press; Jason D. Fuller. 2009. Modern Hinduism and the middle class: beyond 'Reform' and 'Revival' in the historiography of colonial India. *Journal of Hindu Studies*, 2 (2), pp. 160-78.

<sup>10</sup> For a feminist analysis of the early nineteenth-century reform efforts targeting women, see Lucy Carroll. 1983. Law, custom, and statutory social reform: the Hindu widows' Remarriage Act of 1856. *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, (20), 1983, pp. 363-88; Sekhar Bandyopadhyay. 1995. Caste, widow remarriage and the reform of popular culture in colonial Bengal. In: Bharati Ray, ed. *From the seams of history: essays on Indian women*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 8-36. Lata Mani. 1989. Contentious traditions: the debate about Sati in colonial India. In: Kumkum Sangari & Sudesh Vaid, eds. *Recasting women: essays in Indian colonial history*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, pp. 88-126; Jana Tschurennev. 2004. Between non-interference in matters of religion and the civilizing mission: the prohibition of Suttee in 1829. In: Harald Fischer-Tine & Michael Mann, eds. *Colonialism as civilizing mission: cultural ideology in British India*. London: Anthem Press, pp. 68-94.

<sup>11</sup> For a critique of the beliefs and structures that sanction enforced Hindu widowhood, see Uma Chakravarti & Preeti Gill. 2001. *Shadow lives: writings on widowhood*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

<sup>12</sup> Shastras are treatises written to explain some idea or concept, especially in matters involving religion.

<sup>13</sup> Puranas are religious texts dating from about 400 CE to 1400 CE that consist of narratives of the history of the universe from creation to destruction, genealogies of kings, heroes, sages, and demigods, and descriptions of Hindu cosmology, philosophy, and geography.

<sup>14</sup> *Varnashrama* is a system of social division within Hindu society. It delineates the four *varnas* (orders) and the four *ashramas* (stages of life). The four *varnas* are the *Brahmans* or priests; the *Kshatriyas* or warriors and rulers; the *Vaishyas* or the merchants and farmers; and the *Sudras* or the laborers and craft-workers. The four *ashramas* are *brahmachari* or celibate student; *grihastha* or householder; *vanaprastha* or retired person living in the forest; and the *sanyasi* or wandering ascetic.

<sup>15</sup> "Speech at Pachaiyappa's College"; "Speech at public meeting, Cuddalore"; "Speech at Tanjore". In: *Collected works*. Also, Gandhi was reading and composing his response to Katherine Mayo during this period. See "Interview to 'The Hindu', Madras,". In: *CWMG*, 40, 2 September 1927 – 1 December 1927, pp. 68f. His response entitled "Drain inspector's report" was published in *Young India*, 15 September 1927.

<sup>16</sup> "Letter to S. Ramanathan," *CWMG*, 39, 4 June 1927- 1 September 1927, p. 215. In 1925, a controversy erupted over the provision of separate dining facilities for Brahmin and non-Brahmin students in the Cheranmadevi Gurukulam, a residential school, in Tirunelveli district of Madras presidency. The Gurukulam was started by V. V. S. Iyer with financial support from the Tamilnadu Congress Committee. Periyar along with prominent non-Brahmin Congress leaders such as Varadarajulu Naidu, V. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, and S. Ramanathan condemned the school's discriminatory practice. Iyer



responded saying that the school was merely being sensitive to the feelings of some Brahmin parents who had requested such an arrangement. The matter was even brought to the attention of Gandhi who advocated non-coercion in the matter of religious feelings of people. Periyar resigned as secretary of the Tamilnadu Congress Committee over the issue. See Nicholas Dirks. 2001. *Castes of mind: colonialism and the making of modern India*. Princeton University Press, p. 258; M. S. S. Pandian. 2007. *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin: genealogies of the Tamil political present*. Delhi: Permanent Black, p. 190.

<sup>17</sup> "Honourable Labour", *CWMG*, 39, 4 June – 1 September, 1927, pp. 148f.; *Kudi Arasu*, 14 August 1927.

<sup>18</sup> A. Ramasami Mudaliar (1887-1976), editor of *Justice* from 1926-35, member of the Madras Legislative Council from 1920-26 and the Madras Legislative Assembly from 1931 to 1934, mayor of Madras from 1928 to 1930 and member of the Viceroy's executive council from 1939-42, argued along similar lines in editorials he wrote in *Justice* in September 1927. See NMMML, A.S. *Venu Papers, List 190 (XXI) S. No. 28: Sir A. Ramasamy Mudaliar's editorials on social problems in 'Justice' 1927*.

<sup>19</sup> Sanskrit epic poem, composed in its present form c. 400 CE, that depicts the dynastic struggle culminating in a major war between two sets of cousins, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. It contains the text of the *Bhagavad-Gita* (a dialogue between the Pandava prince Arjuna and his charioteer Krishna), an incarnation of Vishnu, numerous subplots, and interpolations on theology, morals, and statecraft.

<sup>20</sup> Although Periyar had quit the Congress in 1925 over the issue of communal representation for non-Brahmins, he retained a healthy respect for Gandhi and reiterated it in his editorial even while criticising Gandhi for his stand on *varnashrama*. See *ibid*.

<sup>21</sup> Thevaram is a collection of Tamil Saivite devotional poetry. Saivites revere Shiva, one of the Hindu Trinity, as the supreme being.

<sup>22</sup> Rest houses where accommodation and food are provided by a charitable institution for nominal rates or sometimes free of charge.

<sup>23</sup> A position first articulated by James Mill (1773-1836), Scottish political theorist and proponent of classical liberalism, in *The History of British India*, 5th edn., (1) (1858; reprint, New York: Chelsea House, 1968), pp. 309, 311, 313.

<sup>24</sup> Vaikom in Travancore state (now part of the southwestern Indian state of Kerala) was the site of a movement against untouchability in 1924-25 that sought to allow 'untouchables' access to roads surrounding the main temple in the town. Periyar was one of the leaders of this movement.

<sup>25</sup> Mayo, Katherine. 1929. *Slaves of the Gods*. Harcourt, Brace and Company. In this book, Mayo provided an account of the Devadasi system.

<sup>26</sup> Ayyamuthu, *Mayo's charges*, p. 6. Here, he mentions strange superstitious practices in Karamadai in Coimbatore district involving women swallowing whole a banana spat out by their menfolks, obscene practices involving women and stone idols and on occasion live-idols in Salem and sacrifices of animals made in Salem with the belief that they will thwart the impending death of a person.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>28</sup> The Ramayana: a true reading, in: *Collected Works of Periyar E.V.R*, compiled by K. Veeramani. Chennai: Periyar Self-respect Propaganda Institution, 2005, pp. 603-61; *Revolt*, 21 November 1928, 28 November 1928, 5 December 1928, 12 December 1928, 19 December 1928, 2 January 1929, 16 January 1929 and 13 February 1929.

<sup>29</sup> M. K. Acharya, a Tamil Brahmin member of the Central Indian Legislative Assembly, was a vocal opponent of the Bill. See H. N. Mitra, ed. *Indian annual register: an annual digest of public affairs of India, 1919-47*, vol. II, 1929. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, pp. 128f., 138f., 147.




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