



# Periyar E.V. Ramasamy's Journalistic Revolt: Radical Rationalism And Commonsense

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## Abstract

In Hindu traditions, the self is increasingly mystified with religious doctrines. On the contrary, Periyar E.V. Ramasamy assigned a rational and humane quality with secular view. The concept of self-respect was vividly propagated through his speeches and writings of Periyar especially in *Kudi Arasu* and *Revolt* when the level of literacy was very low during the pre-independent period. However, Madras Presidency then had higher level of literacy. Though his writings for Tamil readers in *Kudi Arasu* seem to be vocal and received well, the translated English version in *Revolt* did not appeal well for the English readers since majority belonged to the upper strata of the society. Besides, his journalistic ventures did not assure the financial gains even to continue the publications. Thus, he had to terminate the *Revolt*, of course not his rebelling attitude towards social evils, after couple of years. The *Revolt* remains a symbol of radical scholarship in the world of English readers today.

**Keywords:** Periyar, *Revolt*, Rationalism, Self-respect, Journalism.

## Introduction

The beginning of press media in India was associated with the British East India Company. *The Bengal Gazette*, the first newspaper in India published in 1780, largely served as an agent for the British administration propagating their views. Later, in reaction to the views of the colonial administration, Indian intellectuals began to express their views through their own newspapers. Along with the advancements in printing technology, the nationalist discourse occupied prominent place in newspapers during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. However, the anti-colonial sentiments embedded in conservative outlook did not satisfy some radical thinkers. The emergence of radical thinking is well associated with Periyar E. V. Ramasamy in Tamil Nadu. Among his various ventures,

*Kudi Arasu* and *Revolt* became prominent in upholding self-respect of the Tamils against several social evils and irrationalism.

### Periyar's Venture in Journalism

Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (1879-1973) began his early life having business interests in his locality. However, he had critical outlook and did not accept anything at face value. He came to witness that several beliefs and customs did not have any rational basis. He reasoned those beliefs responsible for social evils. Thus, he sharpened his attack through his speeches and writings. Initially, the Indian National Congress provided him a public space to actualize his interests. From 1919 to 1925, he participated in several activities including Vaikom Satyagraha. He was also the chairmanship of Erode Municipality and undertook Gandhian programmes such as spreading Khadi, picketing toddy shops, boycotting foreign cloth, and eradicating untouchability. Later, he resigned from the Congress in 1925 for its conservative outlook on social issues. He relentlessly toured several places in India and abroad [1] His belief in reason, equality and humanism made him popular and also earned him the title Periyar. His Self-Respect Movement had brought out radical changes in the commonsense of the masses as well as scholars.

His journalistic ventures greatly helped to propagate his rationalism along with his speeches and activities. He was associated with several newspapers and magazines from 1925 to till his demise. These included *Kudi Arasu* (1925), *Dravidian* (1927), *Revolt* (1928), *Puratchi* (1933), *Pagutharivu* (1934), *Viduthalai* (1935), *Justice* (1942), *Unmai* (1970) and *The Modern Rationalist* (1971). He himself launched some of them and edited others. He spent a sizable amount of his earnings on these publications. He lost money in these ventures and was jailed on many occasions for the writings that he published. He used to hold his views firmly. His commitment to human values was unshakeable [2]

### The Aim of *Revolt*

Among the self-respect journals which adopted radical rationalism as their creed, *Revolt* was the first English language weekly to be published by the movement, and edited by Periyar. The weekly was launched at Erode, the birthplace of Periyar on 7 November 1928. It was published by Periyar's wife Nagammal and printed at Unmai Vilakkam Press [3] It was briefly shifted to Madras and then back to Erode before it ceased publication in early 1930. In the declaration filed before the Judicial Magistrate for registering the journal, Nagammal said, "By the word 'Revolt', I mean breaking with restrictions. That is, breaking against that constraint which goes against nature and reason - whether in politics, in bureaucracy, capitalism or in gender relations - whichever constraint that violates human welfare (dharma) and human nature." [4]

It covered news relating to political events in general and self-respect movement in particular. It also carried critical essays on contemporary politics, and social reforms. Besides, it had space for regular columns on science and religion. Its editorial readily responded with ongoing political and social events, such as the Simon boycott, Nehru Report, Child Marriage Restraint Act, Devadasi Abolition Bill. *Revolt* was initially edited by Periyar, along with S. Ramanathan. Later, S. Guruswami became as joint editor. The language was quite different in making satire with distinct political humor. It revealed social hypocrisy, orthodoxy and authority in clear terms. Writers from different background began to narrate their critical views on exiting society in support of Self-respect movement. K.M. Balasubramaniam, P. Chidambaram Pillay, and R. Viswanathan were some of the notable contributors. Surprisingly, few Brahmins were also attracted by the rationalistic tone of the journal and began to express their views.

When the national movement was getting strength along with the censorship of British colonial rule, it was no painless to publish the views which would affect their authority and sentiments. Even though the idea of social reforms was welcomed it was very difficult to oppose the authority of Brahmins and nationalists either in writings or speeches publicly. Thus, those who were supporting the self-respect movement had to invite dangers from unknown spheres. The authors had to conceal their identity for their own safety. They wrote with their pseudonyms or even initials or some strange word, such as, Kiruku, Fountain Pen, Ritus, and BG. Sometimes they use actual initials, for instance, PCP for P. Chidambaram Pillay, Jeejay for George Joseph, and Esji for S. Guruswami. Miss Gnanam for her witty and sharply edged criticism of religions with boldness was remarkable. Apart from original rendering in English considerable portions were translated from Tamil writings and speeches by the Self-respect leaders, publicists and intellectuals, including Periyar, R. K. Shanmugam and A. Ramasami Mudaliar. It also extracted articles from like-minded journals published elsewhere in the country that featured the views of the Jat Pat Todak Mandal of Lahore, an anti-caste association, linked to the Arya Samaj and which reported on Dr Ambedkar and the incipient dalit movement in the Bombay Presidency. Revolt followed anti-caste debates in Kerala, those initiated by Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam. The magazine also featured regular news and views from the global world of rationalism and atheism[5]

### The Coverage of Revolt

Periyar started his Revolt when the English literacy was very low in Madras Presidency. Even literacy in mother tongue was below eleven per cent, English literacy was merely seven percent. Besides, the people having the habit of reading newspapers were far below. However, Periyar dared to start the English weekly Revolt in 1928. Periyar's abiding interest and commitment for casteless society, women's rights, rationalism, and proportional representation led him to take up such ventures. Periyar said that he wanted to the people outside of Tamil region to be informed about the ideals of the Self-respect movement and also wanted an English forum to counter the views expressed by Brahmins and the politically selfish class against the Self-respect movement, for which he ventured to start the English publications.

Periyar intended to spread his ideas from local, national to international spheres. For that, he believed, English would facilitate his programmes. Revolt responded to several national and international issues. For instance, the religious reforms undertaken by Amir Amanullah of Afghanistan, the ambivalent stand of Congress on untouchability, double stand of Congress towards the British, the controversy created by the publication of Katherine Mayo's Mother India, the temple entry struggles organized by the Self-respecters, Dr Muthulakshmi's Devadasi abolition bill, the Child Marriage Restraint Bill, and especially the orthodox Hindus' opposition to both were some of the issues Periyar exposed in his Revolt. The editor Guruswami put forth his rationalistic views with wit and satire. *Revolt* and its editors were in touch with international rationalist and atheistic groups and published several essays on science, atheism. And so on. The weekly carried news of anti-caste groups elsewhere in India as well.

During its active years from 1928 to 1930 the *Revolt* in its editorials and critical essays captured the intensity of these years and ignited debates. Apart from the regular columns on atheism, science and rationality, it provided critical views on these issues. A radical thinker as well as a common reader liked to use *Kudi Arasu* and *Revolt* to attack caste discrimination, champion women's rights, and challenge religious orthodoxy. Periyar understood the power of the press to shape opinions, mobilize the masses, challenge the status quo and prepare the people for a new social revolution. He himself believed in his speeches and writings to bring out changes in individual as well as society. Many noticed that Periyar was bold, confrontational, and provocative in his speeches and writings. He conveyed his message simple and straight without any jargons or literary flavor. His way of communication reflected his locality. Though his words were sometimes sharp he never insulted an honest man. For his radical views, blunt



style, and attacks on orthodox beliefs made him a controversial figure. He was criticized by traditionalists, religious leaders, and those who disagreed with his ideology. He faced censorship, lawsuits, and even violence from opponents. However, they could not curtail the influence of his message on society.

In the inaugural issue of *Revolt*, S. Ramanathan wrote, “They -Brahmin politicians can pose a challenge for us in areas where *Kudi Arasu* doesn’t have a reach. They can launch a campaign in foreign languages. Our needs have grown and so, for the expansion of our movement, we need an English newspaper to get our ideas to the English-speaking people.”[6] Due to some unavoidable circumstances, *Revolt* had to be published from Madras for a while. Later, it was brought back to Erode. Periyar made the initial investment in *Revolt*. But as the newspaper’s popularity began growing, it started generating enough revenue through sales and subscriptions initially, but later, it was not able to meet its expenses. A total of fifty five issues of *Revolt* were published during the two years of its existence. It had to be shut down due to consistent losses. The following excerpts from an editorial titled ‘Religion is in Danger’ published by *Revolt* in its issue dated 22 November 1929 is an example of its journalism of courage: “The condition in India is however quite different. Here is a religion, whose name is not found in any of the so-called religious books of the ‘Hindus’ and whose sole credit lies in its undeterminable origin and time. But many of its followers say that the Vedas are the authority for their religion. The Vedas are again hypocritically said to be written in a language delivered by the Almighty himself. It is supposed to be written in an unspoken dead language, which should be heard and read only by a divinely descended population of three per cent of the ‘Hindus’. The remaining ninety seven per cent of the population are given the appellation of ‘Sudras’, which means ‘either slaves or sons of Brahmins’ concubines’. If these ‘Sudras’ dare to read the Vedas, their tongues are to be cut off; if they hear the Vedas, their ears are to be filled with molten lead; if they keep any portion of the Vedas in their hearts, their hearts are to be thrown in the fire.”[7]

Periyar, who was very impressed with the Rationalist Press Association of London, also established The Rational Books Publication Society. The Society came into being on 13 December 1932 and was registered as a limited company. The Society was basically an offshoot of the Self-Respect Movement. Periyar wanted to build a corpus of Rs 30,000 by selling the shares of the company at the rate of Rs 10 per share. The corpus was to be used for publishing Indian and foreign literature on intellectual discourse. Many well-known intellectuals and authors were associated with the Self-Respect Movement. Periyar wanted their thoughts and ideas to reach the entire Dravidian population through the four south Indian languages. Initially, the Society published books only in Tamil. In the first phase, twenty books by leading rationalists from all over the world were made available to the people at affordable prices [8]

### Remarkable Quotes from *Revolt*

“We cannot blame the Brahmin arrogance, but the Non-Brahmin mentality. The Brahmins are not troublesome as many of us think. But keep him at a distance he will be the most useful servant of society. What is now wanted is that the Non Brahmins should realize that there is no mediator between God and man, and between man and man there is no grade by right of birth.”[9]

“If a man does not rob his brother, it is not because The Kural says so, but because he is afraid of the policeman. If a man is afraid of committing rape, it is not that The Naladiyar refrains him from the act (Thirukural and Naladiyar are ancient prescriptive ethical Tamil Jain texts – editors), but he is terribly afraid of the law above him. Hence, when once the General Law is made up-to-date, there need be no necessity to rewrite the Shastras and Puranas.”[10]

“Varnashrama Dharma theory is evolved by a primitive and barbarous method of thinking. And it is supported by madmen logic and reason. Thus it is a hybrid between stark madness and primitives savagery.”[11]

“Ignorance and disease are the main causes of human poverty. Attempts to eradicate ignorance and diseases are the best charities. Such humanitarian gifts as the building of educational institutions and hospitals are the real needs of the people but not the temples. The proverbial Dharidra Narayana wants bread and not stories. What do the half-starving and half-naked care whether Siva had a consort or Rama’s wife was abducted or Vivekananda excelled others in Chicago on Laws of Karma?”[12]

## Conclusion

Periyar used his in radical rationalism as an effective instrument to bring out changes both at the level of individual and society. Apart from his speeches and activities, his journalistic ventures facilitated him to carry out his mission. Besides, the vernacular medium he wanted to English to counter the irrationalism and hypocrisy of the religion and also to counter the scholars who were pretending to be its authority. His writings were simple and straight without any jargons or literary twists. They were frequently perceived as confrontational and provocative. Censorship, lawsuits, and even violence from opponents were normal scenario which he resolutely faced then. Both lay man and a radical thinker frequently use his words to attack caste discrimination, champion women's rights, and challenge religious orthodoxy. For that, Kudi Arau helped the Tamil literates and the Revolt for the English literates.

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