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Soliloquizing Brahmans:  
Questions to a Telugu journal from the late 19th century

*Proposal*

The purpose of this article is to consider identities created or represented in historical sources. Is there something like a stable core of the self, a flavour, some kind of *rasa*, which is or was able to find its way from a once 'real' life into documents, to linger there until it is extracted or (re)discovered by historians? Is it possible for individuals or groups of people, united by common cultural attributes, to actively represent themselves through essentialist expressions and to 'know' about their identity? If the constitution of a social identity is an act of power,<sup>1</sup> how are these processes represented in history? What, moreover, is the 'way' of such a process of identification? Are there not identities read into texts, as well as read out of them? What does the discourse allow me, as a historian, to say about this, if I want my words to be accepted and understood as a part of its reality?

The concept of identity put forward here is inspired by the historical sources used; it is not an essentialist, but a strategic and a positional one. It does not, therefore, assume a stable core, unfolding from beginning to end through the ups and downs of history without change. If such a conception were transferred to a broader 'cultural' identity, the position taken in this article is not the 'collective or true self hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves' which a people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common"<sup>2</sup> and which suggests a unchanging oneness underlying other, superficial differences. On the contrary, identities here are never unified, but often intersecting and antagonistic. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation. What one finds in the journal analyzed in this article are historical developments which disturb any fixed notion of the culture in focus. In fact, apart from a struggle about questions concerning social reform, the debates which dominated the intellectual world were about whether or not contemporary identities invoke an origin in the historical past with which they seem to correspond. I would argue that identities revolve around questions of using the

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<sup>1</sup> Laclau 1990: 31.

<sup>2</sup> Hall 1994: 393.

resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being.

Identities are constituted within, not outside discourse. Tradition, whether 'invented' or not, has to be read not as an endless reiteration but as a changing sameness; it cannot be a return to where one came from, but a process of accepting and agreeing with one's routes. Identities are narrations, but certainly the fictional nature of narrativization does not weaken its discursive effectiveness, even though the process of becoming a part of a story takes place, at least partly, in the imagination.

Identities are produced in specific historical contexts, within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Rather than being the marker of a non-changing, 'naturally' constituted unity, they arise within the play of specific modalities of power, and are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion. They are constructed through difference. This means that it is only through the relation to the other, the relation to what it is not (what it lacks), to its outside, that its 'positive' meaning (its identity) can be constructed. It is their ability to exclude that essentially makes identities work, their ability to push beyond their margins what they are not. 'Successful' identities affirm themselves only by repressing that which threatens them. This, again, necessarily means that the constitution of a social identity is an act of power.<sup>3</sup>

Identities are permanently 'in danger', never complete, representing a never ending constructing and deconstructing play of power. They are constructed in or through *différance* and constantly destabilized by what they leave out. They create subjects which can be spoken, and are points of contemporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct. As the results of successful articulations of the subject into the flow of discourse, they are the positions which the subject is bound to take up, although it always 'knows' that they are representations. Representation is constructed across a 'lack', across a division, from the place of the other, and thus can never be appropriate ('identical') to the subject processes which are invested in them. This, on the one hand, of course, cannot be thought of as one-sided, and on the other hand, to repeat again, has to be understood as a process. So it seems *identification* 'signifies' more adequately what all this is about: the relation of the subject to discursive formations as an articulation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Laclau 1990: 31.

<sup>4</sup> And all articulations are properly relations of 'no necessary correspondence': See Laclau 1990: 35.



*Evidence*

The reform movements in Andhra, during the second half of the 19th century, are associated with the name of Kandukuri Viresalingam (Tel. kandukūri vīrēśaliṅgam, 1848–1919). It was he who initiated and led these movements, organizing them ideologically as well as in practice.

Kandukuri Viresalingam was born in Rajahmundry, in 1848, and died there in 1919. He was not only a social reformer, but is nowadays widely recognized as the father of modern Telugu literature. He was the author of poems, novels, plays, dramas, essays and satires, and translated Sanskrit and English literature into Telugu. Being among the first literary critics in Andhra, he published a history of Telugu literature (*Kavula caritra*, 1886), which was used in schools and colleges, and an even today well-known autobiography (*Sviya caritramu*, 1915). He was very active in the field of early Telugu journalism and published a number of journals, most of them being vehicles for his ideas on social reform.

Apart from the range of his activities, what distinguished Viresalingam from most other social reformers and scholars of his time was his commitment to action. In contrast to other scholars, who were primarily trying to sanction social reform by quoting appropriate passages from classical Sanskrit texts, he became famous within his own lifetime for his attempts to change certain practices in Telugu society.<sup>5</sup> He performed more than forty widow remarriages, started two homes for widows in need and opened two girls' schools. Even though he did not achieve much and many of his projects ended in relative failure, his actions were recognized as significant by contemporaries and later leaders and scholars.<sup>6</sup>

Viresalingam's most successful journal was *Vivēka vardhani* (The Growth of Wisdom), which began publication in 1874 in Rajahmundry. With around 200 subscribers it belonged to the most read Telugu journals of the 19th century.<sup>7</sup> Next to scholarly articles, it spread Viresalingam's ideas about social reform, with moralistic and polemical essays which were aimed primarily at his fellow Brahmins, to criticize their prejudices, backward oriented traditions and shortcomings. In the beginning, powerful British individuals were also his targets, but as his dependence on British officials increased in time he focussed on Indian public figures.<sup>8</sup> In general, Viresalingam was, on the one hand, trying to 'import' from

<sup>5</sup> *The Hindu*, September 5, 1913.

<sup>6</sup> In 1911, J. Gurunatham published the first biography of Viresalingam in the English language, thus laying the foundation stone of his ongoing fame in literature and science.

<sup>7</sup> Leonard 1991: 158.

<sup>8</sup> For an extensive discussion of Viresalingam's life, see Leonard 1991.

western culture what he thought were its best features which, on the other hand, added to his other concern for the improvement of the Indian 'nation', a term frequently used by him in his writings.<sup>9</sup>

Of significant importance and closely related to his activities concerning social reform were Viresalingam's literary works. He not only changed the landscape of Telugu literature by introducing new forms of literature, like novels, short stories and modern dramas, but played a major role in the revolution of the language itself. The Telugu used in premodern literature had mostly been a highly sanskritised language, the so-called *grānthika bhāṣa*, which was for the average Telugu speaker unintelligible. Even though Viresalingam was proficient in this – he published, for example, a Telugu version of the Mahabharata in 1879 – he decided that Telugu literature should be comprehensible and started to write in colloquial Telugu, *vyavahārika bhāṣa*. In the 1880s, Viresalingam completely turned away from classical Telugu and wrote only in the colloquial variant. This also paved the way for the 'meteoric rise' of Telugu from a medium of communication to a marker of identity.<sup>10</sup>

The main tool for distributing his ideas and promoting a different language of literature for Viresalingam were his journals, where many of his literary works were published before appearing in book form. Though they can hardly be compared to the form and influence newspapers and journals have nowadays, their discursive power should not be underestimated. As new sites of communication and representation, vernacular journals in 19th-century India sought to be influential. It is evident from their contents that the authors' or publishers' primary purpose was to spread ideas and information to people already gained for their cause or to fight differently-minded journals. A well-known example comes from Viresalingam's own context. A year after he had begun publishing his first reform journal, *Vivēka vardhani*, Kokkonda Venkataratnam (Tel. kokkoṇḍa veṅkaṭaratnam, 1842–1915), an orthodox Brahman who was a teacher at the Presidency College in Madras, started *Hāsyā vardhani* (Growth of Laughter), also a monthly. As a leader of conservative circles, which strictly opposed social reform, he used this journal as an instrument to attack the ideas presented in *Vivēka vardhani*. In reaction to this, Viresalingam added, another year later, a supplement to his journal called *Hāsyā sanjīvanī* (Bringing Laughter to Life), to attack Venkataratnam's ideas.

<sup>9</sup> Vīrēśāliṅgam 1951–52.7: 323–447.

<sup>10</sup> As described by Mitchell 2004. Nevertheless, even in the 20th century, many orthodox thinking people did not consider texts in the colloquial language to belong to the canon of Telugu literature. See Frese: in print a.



An important context for the evolution and contents of Telugu journals of the late 19th century was the social reform movements founded in Andhra, originally initiated in Bengal by activists like Rammohan Roy and Keshub Candra Sen. Sen had given a lecture in Madras in 1864, which had such an effect that it led, in the same year, to the founding of Veda Samaj, a monotheistic reformist society, which also brought out a journal, *Tattvabōdhini*. In their statutes, one finds already an explicit statement against the “superstitions and absurdities which at present characterise Hindu ceremonies”,<sup>11</sup> which represents one of the fundamental positions that all social reform movements in Andhra had in common. Around 1869, the society was renamed and became the first Brahma Samaj in South India.

The other main concern of the reformist thinkers was the status of women in Indian society. As mentioned above, Viresalingam attempted to improve the situation especially of young widows, and he also started a movement against the caste of courtesans (*veśya* or *bogam-vāḷḷu*) who, in his eyes, led a sinful life. These agitations became known as the *Widow Remarriage* and *Anti-Nautch* movements and were mainly supported by Indians with a western education, for their moral concepts were heavily influenced by Victorian values.

In the year 1878, Viresalingam founded, in Rajahmundry, the first Prarthana Samaj of Andhra. It was a local branch, in many ways connected with its prototype, the Brahma Samaj in Madras. Yet, the parameters were slightly different. Not only was it led by the most active and influential social reformist of the whole region, but the town of Rajahmundry also provided particularly favourable conditions for the projects of the reformers. The city, situated in the delta of the Godavari River, was directly ruled by a British collector and had a government college with an Englishman as principal. This resulted in a wider acceptance of western education and less support for traditional scholarship. Additionally, a recent dam construction, by Sir Arthur Cotton (1803–1899), had enhanced the fertility of the area significantly and led to greater wealth, especially amongst the upper castes. Their children had the chance to receive an English education, which was a promising precondition for a successful career.

The colonial government, which observed the developments of public opinion and the changes in the social sphere closely, did not oppose social reforms and was far from making the lives of the reformers difficult. The ideas behind their activities matched the ideology of the Raj: they implied that the Indians accepted moral inferiority. Viresalingam was even awarded the title Rao Bahadur, which was the second lowest on the scale

<sup>11</sup> Bose 1994.1: 171–175.

of titles awarded by the British, but it was awarded only rarely at that time and usually only to distinguished chairmen of municipal councils or to lawyers who had performed some outstanding public service.

In 1891, Viresalingam helped to establish two Telugu journals. One was *Cintāmaṇi*, a literary journal, which was regionally successful in stimulating the composition of Telugu novels, the other, *Satya saṃvardhani* (Growth of Truth), was the mouthpiece of the Prarthana Samaj of Rajahmundry. The latter was a bilingual (English and Telugu) monthly, and saw its first issue released on 31 July. It was run by students of the Prarthana Samaj, but Viresalingam is said to have supervised the publishing and personally checked the Telugu articles.<sup>12</sup> The editors were S. Mṛtyunjaya Rāo and R. Veṅkaṭa Śivūḍu, who also wrote some of the English articles. Viresalingam had allowed them the use of the *Vivēka vardhani* Press, where his journal of the same name was printed.

*Satya saṃvardhani* was, according to its subheading, “mainly devoted to Religious, Social and Moral topics”. Its opening article, titled “Our-selves”, says:

For some time past, the attention of the members of the Rajahmundry Prardhana Samaj has been occupied with the problem of finding a clue to the miserable condition of the lower orders of society. The absence of periodical journals in these parts calculated to convey useful information to the people, together with the want of effort on the part of the educated to bring up the less enlightened brethren of the community, has all the more urged us to undertake this work of publishing a Monthly Journal – the Satya Samvardhani. Our humble object in starting this periodical is to show our ignorant brethren the necessity of having a true Religion, and not only to point out to them the pernicious influence of some of our customs over the social and moral well-being and progress of the community, but to propose, as far as we honestly know, remedial measures to those evils. The Satya Samvardhani, then, discusses these important questions – Religious, Social, and Moral – chiefly in simple Telugu, and earnestly attempts to bring the minds of people to Truth and Virtue. It is almost needless to state that ours is a humble position, and, as such, we look to the public – especially the well-wishers of the country and the educated – for hearty support. Feeling sure that our appeal for encouragement will not be heard in vain, we commence the paper with the assurance that our Almighty Father will guide us inspite of every obstacle and hindrance.<sup>13</sup>

It is surprising that one of the first sentences speaks of an “absence of periodical journals”, knowing that *Satya saṃvardhani* was printed at the same press as *Vivēka vardhani*, which had started as a monthly in 1874 but become a weekly in the meantime. Yet, this hints at the religious commitment of the publisher(s); they obviously wanted to make a

<sup>12</sup> Veṅkaṭa Śivūḍu 1931: 31.

<sup>13</sup> *Satya saṃvardhani*, Vol. I, No. 1, July 1891: 1–2.



difference. *Vivēka vardhani* was a political magazine, with an occasionally ferocious Viresalingam attacking vehemently anyone who behaved in a way not meeting his standards. In contrast, *Satya samvardhani* presented its ideas in a much smoother way. Only from time to time were there articles condemning social practices that should be subject to reform, such as child marriage to much older men. Most of the contents of *Satya samvardhani* consist of theistic prayers, which provide examples of how to behave and try to link Christian and Hindu topics.<sup>14</sup>

That the journal was bilingual did not mean that the Telugu portions were translations of the English articles or the other way round. Usually, there were not more than one or two articles in English, situated at the beginning of the journal, and the by far greater number of pages was dedicated to Telugu. The English articles almost always dealt with moral or religious topics, like the “Sweetness of Prayer”<sup>15</sup> or “Practical Religion”<sup>16</sup>. Some reports of annual meetings are in English and, interestingly, also the ‘acknowledgements’, that is, the list of subscribers. Their names are given in European script, naturally leading to variations of one and the same name in transcript. The Telugu parts also include several articles about religious and moral topics in every issue, but also biographical articles (like those of R. Tagore<sup>17</sup> or Ramabai Sarasvati<sup>18</sup>), dramas with moralistic messages, and the “news and notes” section, mostly with English headings and Telugu contents.

The articles never gave the name of their authors at the end. As mentioned above, the journal was managed by a group of students, who also wrote the articles; but who was responsible for which contribution remains unsaid. On the other hand, the office-bearers of the Prarthana Samaj were officially announced in the journal when they were elected, which took place once a year (for example, in July 1892, with Viresalingam as the president, Mṛtyunjaya Rāo as the Secretary, Śrīrāmulu as the treasurer, etc.<sup>19</sup>). So the ‘literary activity’ stayed anonymous, whereas the names of functionaries were announced.

The subscribers of the journal mostly came from the region, although there were some who lived as far away from Rajahmundry as Rangoon in Burma. The subscription rate was 12 Annas per year, a single issue cost 2 Annas. ‘Supporters’ were asked 4 rupees for an annual subscription, ‘patrons’ 12 rupees. It is striking that about 90 percent of the subscribers

<sup>14</sup> For example by speaking about Jesus and Caitanya as examples for “love and forgiveness” in Vol. 1, No. 5, November 1891.

<sup>15</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 2, No. 2, August 1892.

<sup>16</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 2, No. 3, September 1892.

<sup>17</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 1, No. 11, Mai 1892.

<sup>18</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 1, No. 12, June 1892.

<sup>19</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 2, No. 1, July 1892.

were Brahmans, one finds only very few names which hint at other castes. There are some Kapus and Reddis among them, and some British people, but only one Muslim appears during all the years the journal was published. Moreover, titles seem to have been of considerable importance. Those who had obtained a M. A. or B. A., of which there were many, took care to have it mentioned in the list of subscribers.<sup>20</sup> This again hints at the high standard of education of those who read this (and other) journal(s).

At the top of the list of subscribers, the names of some patrons keep reappearing. They supported *Satya samvardhani* over the years with donations, which obviously helped a lot in the overall project of editing and producing the journal. Among them were the Zamindar of Polavaram, the Rajas of Parlakimidi, Madugula and Vishakhapatnam. These rulers or landlords played an interesting role in the Andhra of the 19th century. They were often rulers who no longer were bestowed with royal powers and owed their position as a 'quasi-king' to a silent agreement with the colonial rulers. Though they were not allowed to wield much political power, they upheld the character of their courts as centres of culture and 'royal atmosphere'. As they understood the risks of acting in a political way, they shifted their activities to the vast arena of culture, and patronized poetry and music, as well as supported traditional scholars and poets. Such, mainly orthodox scholars and poets revived Sanskrit learning and elevated the rulers to a royal status with their writings, for example, by linking their genealogies with legendary rulers of the past.<sup>21</sup> In addition, the rulers often supported social reform by founding English schools or, as in this case, giving money to reform journals.

To my knowledge, *Satya samvardhani* was published over a period of ten years, from 1891–1901. Due to the early death of its editor, S. Mṛtyunjaya Rāo, in February 1895, the journal ceased publication at the beginning of 1895 and returned only two and a half years later. It then appeared irregularly for some time, with interruptions and incomplete volumes (there is no Volume 7 at all), until it became a regular monthly again in April 1899.

I now turn to discuss statements of identity which are related to the publishers and readers of *Satya samvardhani*, and especially to (their) caste. What was the imagined readership of the authors? What did the authors reveal about themselves? In what way was (their) caste

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<sup>20</sup> Viresalingam seems to have set quite some value on his title Rao Bahadur. For example, he reprimanded a former student for omitting it in a personal letter. See Leonard 1991: 161.

<sup>21</sup> For a concrete example of the 'story' of a historiographical text and how it worked in the context of colonial rule, see Frese: 2003 and Frese: in print b.



represented, what belonged or did not belong to the identity of Brahmins (for it is mainly Brahmins that I am talking about here)? It is, of course, impossible to present something like a summary of the contents of a journal which appeared over a decade. Presented here are some examples from journal articles, which to my eyes reflect the identificatory statements continuously featured in the journal.

As mentioned, *Satya samvardhani* was never decidedly political. It is obvious that the authors did not regret certain developments which had come from Europe, such as the printing press or the railway; on the contrary, it was seen as a blessing.<sup>22</sup> European culture was respected: dance performances in the West were regarded as completely different from those of nautch girls, for they 'belonged to another culture' and were thus acceptable.<sup>23</sup> A sense of some pride shines through when an article, on funeral practices in England, mentions that people in Liverpool and London had begun to burn their dead and credits this to the Indian example.<sup>24</sup> Critical voices targeted at the colonial rulers do not exist in *Satya samvardhani*, although positive statements about the British are relatively rare.

There are no reports about 'events' in the sense of news coverage one finds in newspapers or journals nowadays. A few news items are sometimes mentioned at the end of an issue, yet only in the form of marginal notes. Apart from social events touching the very heart of the concerns of the authors (like marriages of elder men with young girls), even these short notes, never consisting of more than a few sentences, seem to hint at the matter of social reform. The victims of a castaway, close to the Andaman Islands, are rescued by prisoners who risk their lives (which displays an unexpected moral attitude);<sup>25</sup> missionaries and common people from England give money to help the poor in India who suffer from a drought, whereas rich Indians do not give anything.<sup>26</sup> *Satya samvardhani* presents itself as thoughtful and reflective, interpreting rather than presenting events.

This careful strategy is also visible when the authors give reasons as to why reforms should be undertaken, or better, why reforms were not against tradition. Throughout the journal there are steadily reoccurring references to classical (sometimes legal) texts, either mentioned to support their cause or, much more often, to emphasize that there are no objections in the Sastras (Skt. śāstra) against remarriage, the education of

<sup>22</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 2, No. 5–6, November–December 1892.

<sup>23</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 3, No. 3–4, September–October 1893.

<sup>24</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 1, No. 10, April 1892.

<sup>25</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 1, No 7, January 1892.

<sup>26</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 1, No 7, January 1892.

women, and other such matters. One of the first issues of *Satya samvardhani* seems to be largely a reaction to criticism, presumably expressed by the elder fellow citizens of the young authors. There is an explicit statement that they are in no way criticizing the Sastras. On the contrary, social reform, especially in the case of widow remarriage, recovers only what had been lost in the dark ages of history. Widow remarriage is, it is argued, also for the purpose of the nation, because, if widows remarry, there is no need for them to become prostitutes. Finally, the authors offer to discuss matters.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, although the tone in *Satya samvardhani* sometimes seems reluctant and defensive, it was still a reform journal. This meant that the behaviour of contemporary citizens was criticized and traditions were questioned; and not by the government or any renowned person, but by a group of young students. It was certainly known that Viresalingam stood behind the authors and was not only responsible, to a certain degree, for the contents of the journal, but also for the way the authors thought. Yet, was it acceptable or taken serious – a group of young men who wanted to tell their elders and betters how to behave?

In order to be more convincing, the arguments brought forward in connection with the examples quoted in the journals were based on reason and common sense. Again and again, it is pointed out that it could not be right for a 50-year-old man to marry a young girl, and the meaning of marriages between children – for example, an eight-year-old boy and an infant of only three months – is questioned.<sup>28</sup> Statistical arguments are produced: because of the great number of widows and because it is not unusual for men to have more than one wife, there are simply more possible husbands than wives within a subcaste (*śākha*). So, late marriage (or widow marriage) would help much to improve the situation and lessen the incongruity.<sup>29</sup> ‘Technical’ problems are discussed: if girls are too small for the palanquin in which they have to be carried, they might fall down or start crying; so some other girl would have to sit inside to hold the bride, but then the people watching could not know who is who.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, of course, classical texts are quoted – there was no child marriage in the Vedas,<sup>31</sup> and Manu, as well as other law texts, say that remarriage is not a problem.<sup>32</sup> If this is thought to be insufficiently relevant, the English also give a good example of how things should be,

<sup>27</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 1, No. 3, September 1891.

<sup>28</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 4, No. 6, June 1895.

<sup>29</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 4, No. 2–3, August–September 1894.

<sup>30</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 8, No. 7, January 1900.

<sup>31</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 8, No. 7, January 1900.

<sup>32</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 4, No. 2–3, August–September 1894.



as they marry only when they are grown up.<sup>33</sup> Finally, examples from other parts of India are cited: in Mysore a bill is passed that girls under 8 and boys under 14 are no longer allowed to marry, and the new law is sanctioned by scholars;<sup>34</sup> in Maharashtra the government also decides on a minimum age for marriage,<sup>35</sup> and so on.

The first two issues of volume four are almost completely dedicated to marriage and present long articles about what one should consider before marrying. Again, first of all, one should not marry too young, and the husband should be five-six years older than the wife. It should also be a conscious decision by the couple for each other, the degree of education should be similar and, as mentioned at several other instances, it is 'healthier' not to marry relatives (or as far away from close relatives as possible). One argument which repeatedly turns up in support of this is that the union of Hindu women with Mughal men resulted in strong progeny. Finally, the articles offer practical suggestions: as marriages among Brahmans tend to be very expensive, one could marry a widow for nothing; that a marriage between widow and widower should make sense, or between widow and orphan (as they also have a low status in society). In this way there would be less child marriages. After all, it is argued, if women are not allowed to remarry, men should not be in a better position.<sup>36</sup>

There is no topic of reform which is as dominant in the journal as that of marriage. Even the other main reform concern of the publishers, the abolishment of nautch performances and prostitution, does not occupy that much space. It is simply condemned from time to time in short notices when people hire nautch girls, but detailed articles are uncommon. In one letter to the editor, a reader says that officials from the government witnessed dance performances by nautch girls and could not see anything objectionable, so there is yet no law against it. This is criticized by the editors. They say that what the officials had experienced was an 'innocent' version, staged to mislead the British.<sup>37</sup>

Even though Viresalingam and his followers never started an official 'movement', the question about what Hindus, and especially Brahmans, should do in the society the reformers had in mind and what was inappropriate, is repeatedly discussed in *Satya samvardhani*. It was obviously a major concern of the publishers and is very often referred to, not always in specific articles, but mostly between the lines or in marginal remarks.

<sup>33</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 2, No. 5–6, November–December 1892.

<sup>34</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 3, No. 1, July 1893.

<sup>35</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 3, No. 2, August 1893.

<sup>36</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 4, No. 1–3, July–September 1894.

<sup>37</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 3, No. 3–4, September–October 1893.

Next to the two explicitly defined pillars of the reformists, widow remarriage and anti-nautch, critique of customs, rituals and traditional behaviour appears almost everywhere. This offers, among other things, insights into indigenous perspectives on caste and society in general.

The diagnosed snobbishness of Brahmans, shown by treating other castes or even their own wives as creatures by far inferior, is the evident bone of contention for the authors to publish their comments and reform suggestions. In letters to the editor, even subscribers tell about their personal experiences with Brahmans. One reader expresses his lack of understanding about the fact that it was not allowed to mention the name of an untouchable while having a meal with Brahmans. Interestingly (or rather naturally), the author of this letter was a Brahman himself.<sup>38</sup>

Of course, ritual pollution was a major concern of the authors – it is not acceptable for a society which is proud of its knowledge about nature, history and humankind to cling to something like rituals of purification after having had contact with a person from a lower caste.<sup>39</sup> On the contrary, restrictions of all kinds should be abolished. In a speech, held in March 1893, in the Christian College in Madras, K. Subbarao pleaded for a universal commensality, the abolishment of the prohibition of sea voyages, and so on.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, every kind of work, it was argued, possesses dignity, and it is thus possible for everybody to pursue any profession. Caste specific professions are a construction of the society and should not exist.<sup>41</sup>

Such pleas for social reform are often embedded in literature presented in a literary form. For example, a fictive dialogue between a traditionalist and a reformer revolves around rituals and the question as to whether Sudras (Skt. śūdra, Tel. śūdra) should worship Brahmans or not. Although the conversation does not result in any distinct appeal, the intention of the authors, that these things should at least be discussed, is clearly visible.<sup>42</sup> Elsewhere, in a one-act play, *Hindumatsabha*, the ‘contrast’ between Brahmans and Hinduism is picked out as the central theme. One is not defined or determined by the other – so in a way the author claims that Brahmans are not Hindus.<sup>43</sup>

In a similar vein, one article says that Brahmans are lying all the time and are guilty for many a drawback in Indian society. In general, Indians suffer from a low self-esteem and an atmosphere of mistrust is predominant everywhere. Yet, the responsibility for all this is put by the

<sup>38</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 1, No. 8, February 1892.

<sup>39</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 2, No. 7, January 1893.

<sup>40</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 2, No. 8, February 1893.

<sup>41</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 4, No. 6, June 1895.

<sup>42</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 5, No. 6, June 1895.

<sup>43</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 2, No. 3, September 1892.



article onto the shoulders of the foreign peoples of the past who conquered India, or parts of it, because the defeated had to find tricks and techniques to survive, and lying was one of them.<sup>44</sup>

The Brahmans are not only liars, it was said, but some of them have no understanding of what they are doing. The pandits reciting verses from the Vedas do not know the meaning of those texts; they monotonously repeat what they had once learnt by heart. This means that whole rituals are 'without meaning', for other people involved also cannot understand the contextual background.<sup>45</sup> Thus Brahmans even propagate rituals or techniques which are not only unintelligible, but against all rationality. As an example, the authors present the description of a ritual which a husband has to put into practice if he wants to go on a journey and prevent his wife from having sexual intercourse with other men. As the moral conceptions of the Indian society in the late 19th century were far from liberal, the picture of a man rubbing certain kinds of powders into the sexual organs of his wife while she slept surely had an effect.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, idolatry, heavily connected to Brahman practices, was under fire. A range of remarks and articles condemns every kind of idol worship. The true God, it was argued, does not speak through wooden or stone images.<sup>47</sup> Idolatry is something for people in Africa, it was said, which was obviously regarded as a backward, primitive continent. What, asks the author, would be the difference if people in India do the same?<sup>48</sup> An interesting statement, for certainly not only Brahmans would have been touched by this. Were the authors aware of the implications of their critique?

More than once, one finds references to other parts of India in *Satya samvardhani*, especially when the authors intend to highlight the improvable state of things in Andhra. The most interesting example is a 'comparison' between Malayali and Telugu Hindus, firstly because it does not really seem to present a critical view, at least this is not obvious, and secondly, as expected, it mainly presents facts about Brahmans. For that reason, it also belongs to the statements about what Brahmans were and were not (should do and should not do). Though it comes across as not entirely neutral, it seems first of all to be presented for the sake of information. In a journal which fights superstition, the contents of this article appear at least unusual. So one should not, it is stated therein, have an argument with the wives of Brahmans, or give salt and buttermilk to

<sup>44</sup> Of course this means Muslims were responsible, an accusation which appears more than once. *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 2, No. 11, May 1893.

<sup>45</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 8, No. 7, January 1900.

<sup>46</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 2, No. 3, September 1892.

<sup>47</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 5, No. 4, November 1896.

<sup>48</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 8, No. 6, December 1899.

the neighbours after dawn. One should wear white clothes, take a bath before the meals and avoid saying goodbye if one leaves friends on Sunday, Tuesday or Friday nights. Women should stay at home; one should keep an umbrella closed and carry it in the left hand with its top down, and so on.<sup>49</sup> All in all, this article, though presented as a serious contribution, seems to have an almost satirical character.

The authors of *Satya samvardhani* present themselves as determined, but not as perfect. So, they are open to criticism and do not hesitate to publish self-critical statements in their journal. In a letter to the editor, a reader asks why, after five years of *Satya samvardhani*, not much has changed in society.<sup>50</sup> Especially when, beginning with volume six, *Satya samvardhani* faced financial problems and then ceased publication for two and a half years, brief apologetic articles turned up in several volumes, complaining baldly about the obstacles the publishers had to struggle with.<sup>51</sup> Later, one author almost admits defeat, by saying that it is really difficult to enforce social reforms in one's own society.<sup>52</sup>

Other journals are also mentioned, regularly in an advertisement-like way at the end of issues and sometimes also with a comment. When the *Truthseeker*, a conservative Telugu monthly, was started in Rajahmundry in 1893 by a Muslim, the authors express their disappointment that the author, who criticizes the charity and social reform societies, but owed his own education to such an institution.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, they neutrally acknowledged the foundation of a conservative society, without any negative comment.<sup>54</sup>

### *Reassurance*

*Satya samvardhani*, in its form and content, is similar to quite a number of journals which emerged at that time. It can be called a reform journal that sought to convey messages of change to its readership. But did it achieve its aims?

The history of Andhra Pradesh tells us that if there was success, it was very limited. As said above, Viresalingam and his followers managed to inspire a few dozen widow remarriages, but that apart there were hardly

<sup>49</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 8, No. 3, September 1899.

<sup>50</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 6, No. 1, July 1897.

<sup>51</sup> As a consequence of the failure of subscribers to make payments, from May 1900 onwards, issues of the journal were only delivered by the V. P. service. *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 8, No. 11, June 1900.

<sup>52</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 9, No. 2, August 1900.

<sup>53</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 2, No. 3, September 1892.

<sup>54</sup> *Satya samvardhani*, Vol. 3, No. 7–8, January–February 1894.



any palpable changes. The performances of nautch girls continued to take place, and Brahmins did not start to eat with Untouchables. Yet one effect was highly visible: it opened up a new space for a new quality of enunciative strategies, and initially *Satya samvardhani* and other journals acted as a catalyst for other journals. The last quarter of the 19th century witnessed an eruption of new journals. Of course, these were not only reform journals, but also journals dedicated to such subjects as literature, revivalist and caste issues, medicine, and many such others. However, this occupation of a new discursive space was, historically, the most striking development in connection with *Satya samvardhani*: The possibility of wielding power one day, to be part or the centre of a discourse.

At the beginning of this article I mentioned that the sources, the journals, had inspired and modified my understanding of identity. This will have become clearer by now if one reads all these statements and / or articulations as part of a picture the authors of *Satya samvardhani* composed. It is far from coherent, and even if one assumes a traditional or historical core or essence of identity (but where would that be gained from?), it is simply shattered here. Oppositions rule the scenery, a struggle for what and how one should be or not be.

It is worth reiterating that *Satya samvardhani* was a journal for Brahmins made by Brahmins. Although it claims to speak for the whole of society no other caste except Brahmins is mentioned. The only antipode, it seems, of which at least the name from time to time is visible – as people in history, as another religious group – were Muslims. Certainly there were other castes among the subscribers, especially those Reddis and Kapus, but the overwhelming majority belonged to one Varna only. This, therefore, excludes the idea that a group of underprivileged people used a new media to articulate ‘unrealistic’ demands; the authors, for sure, knew what they were doing.

Throughout *Satya samvardhani* they list markers of identity, thus *identifying* what a Brahmin is and should be, and at the same time excluding what a Brahmin is not and should not be. In fact, Brahmins could do and be anything: work in all professions or not, touch anybody or not, be polluted or not, be liars or not, know the Vedas or not, even be Hindus or not. Accepting that the authors of *Satya samvardhani* did not suggest completely absurd things all the time, the range of possible identifications for Brahmins was manifold and antagonistic. Their identity, if assumed, is deconstructed into contextual signifiers, which do not allow the creation of a safe picture. What the spectator learns here is that ‘caste’ (Brahmin) was empty, for it could contain anything.

The struggle, which is visible through these sources, is to fill the emptiness with a given content – to suture the rift of the discursive centre and

to create hegemony. The empty, incomplete character of the discourse is the driving factor, the emptiness makes discourses possible. Power comes into play, not only the power to construct a discursive formation, but also as a power-struggle between formations.<sup>55</sup>

Antagonisms work as the 'symbol of my non-being',<sup>56</sup> of what keeps the (political) project from obtaining a positive identity and thus establishing hegemony. So the antagonistic relationship, what keeps one from oneself, is the only type of identity one can obtain. "The outside is not merely posing a threat to the inside, but is actually required for the definition of the inside. The inside is marked by a constitutive lack that the outside helps to fill".<sup>57</sup>

For this reason, the Brahmins within this journal still needed and created an identificatory outside, but here it was defined 'among themselves'. It becomes evident that 'being Brahmin' was something which needed negotiation, a question sufficiently urgent to dominate the contents of not only *Satya samvardhani*, but more than 30 other journals.<sup>58</sup> What were the answers to the 'impossible' project that aimed at the end of contingency, towards "the realization of a society fully reconciled with itself"<sup>59</sup>? This, alas, is the topic of another story, for here and now the concern is to end with an appropriate question.

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<sup>55</sup> See Laclau 1996.

<sup>56</sup> Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 125.

<sup>57</sup> Torfing 2004: 11.

<sup>58</sup> These journals will be discussed in Frese: in prep.

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